

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

Normand Perreault
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

MWOH# 028
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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History project. The date is March 7th, 2006. Today I'm interviewing Norm Perreault at the Bates Mill complex, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could I have you start just by giving me your full name?

Normand Perreault: Normand Georges Perreault.

AL: And is Perreault spelled P-E-R-R-E-A-U-L-T?

NP: Right, you're right.

AL: And what is your date of birth?

NP: 8/20/29

AL: And where were you born?

NP: Lewiston.

AL: Is that where you grew up?

NP: That's where I grew up.

AL: And so, were your parents from Lewiston as well?

NP: Where they're born?

AL: Were they born here?

NP: My mother was born in Lewiston. My father was born in Quebec, St. Anciens, Quebec.

AL: So he came to the United States, do you know at what age?

NP: I think he said he was in his twenties.

AL: In his twenties, okay, yeah, and what were your parents' names?

NP: My father was, well they used to call him Sam, Arsen, A-R-S-E-N, and my mother was Alice, she was a deLongue, maiden name was deLongue.

AL: And so did your father ever talk about why he came to the U.S., was it work related reasons?

NP: Yes, yeah, mostly. He had a big family in Maine, he came out, he went to the northern part of Maine and then, to support himself, because the family was too big, they couldn't support themselves in Canada. And he went northern part of Maine and after that he got married and his wife had that influenza and she died within a year, and then he moved down to Lewiston, over here, and he married my mother over here. She lived not too far from here. They used to call this Strawberry Place back then, yeah. Now (*unintelligible phrase*) they call it Merton Road.

AL: And what did your dad do for work?

NP: Oh, my dad, he was a lumberjack, and he also worked for Miller's junkyard there, yeah. And he worked at Bates in the boiler room for a while, too, yeah. He was a supervisor in the boiler room. I was just a kid back then.

AL: And how many brothers and sisters do you have?

NP: I've got two brothers and one sister.

AL: And so what was Lewiston like when you were growing up in the '30s and '40s, very different than today?

NP: Oh, the '30s and '40s, I was, when I started, I started working in the bakery on Lisbon Street over here, and back then the mills were fighting with unions all the time. And I went to work, first job I think was in Androscoggin Mill, I went there to learn to weave, you know. My supervisor, the name was George

Bishop, and I worked there for a while and that wasn't, then I got out of there and then I came to Bates over here, I was the same age, sixteen, in the same year I guess, and I worked in Number 5 weave, cleaning looms and stuff like that. And I learned a little bit about weaving.

And then I quit that and I went to work as a lumberjack, yeah, I was a lumberjack quite a few years. And then came to work in the mill, my brother, my brother-in-law's brother was a supervisor and he made us a bet that we wouldn't last in the mill. So two weeks, we took a bet for two weeks, and I was there til it closed.

And then I went to, when the Hill Mill closed I went to Edwards. I was the last man out of the Hill Mill, I was in charge of moving the machinery, sending the machinery, put them on the truck over there where they sold them to. For a while I worked between the Hill Mill and Edwards, then I went to Edwards for thirteen years. And that closed down, I was the last man out of there, too, running out the machinery and everything like that.

And then when I got out of there, well, I didn't have a job so I sent resumes here and there, and ended a job in Sanford, (*unintelligible phrase*) woolen mill over there, but Bates also offered me a job from one of these resumes and I came here instead of going down there. And I was here, well, til both the operations closed.

AL: What year was that about?

NP: That I got out of here?

AL: No, that you came here, after you left Edwards?

NP: After Edwards, that was '85 I think, it was '85.

AL: And then you were here for five or six years?

NP: Yeah, yeah, and then they start curtailing, curtailing, and.

AL: Can you talk to me, describe what your job was like, the job you did in the weave room?

NP: Over here? I was in charge of it, I was overseeing the whole thing. At this mill. At the Hill Mill,

well, the same, about the same thing, overseeing the weave room, but before that I was, what they called over there was a boss changer. I was the boss changer, and I was in charge of putting new styles in and, you know, I was working hand in hand with the designer, which was Miles Godell at the time.

And then, I don't know, they wanted me, to give me a title over there but I didn't accept, general assistant, superintendent. I told them, does it pay more than what I got? No, you'll get the same pay. I said, I don't want it. Just an extra load for the same rate, I didn't want it.

AL: How does the Edward, were there differences between like the Edwards Mill and the Hill Mill and Bates?

NP: Yeah, pretty near the same, except what they were making over there was bedspread and stuff like that, and we went into a lot of upholstery over there, and draperies. That's mostly after I got there, though. Before I got there it was mostly a cotton mill, and they had cotton and rayon I think over there.

AL: Can you recall and talk about some of the people you worked with over the years?

NP: Oh, boy, a lot of them are gone now. Started at the Hill Mill, well, I got some, these pictures over here, these are some of the people I worked with.

Over here, that was Miles Godell, he was, matter of fact, he's the one that hired me, he was personnel manager when I got there. At the end he was a designer. And Armand Michaud, he was an overseer over there, too, at one time.

And this, (*unintelligible phrase*), that was Larry St. Laurence, he was a changer.

And there was Romeo Caron, he was a loom fixer.

And there was Louis Nadeau, he was a loom fixer.

Here, Louis Laliberte, he was a loom fixer.

Arthur Caron, he was also a loom fixer.

Armand Belanger, he was a loom fixer.

And Robert Roy, he went there, he was a weaver, then he became a supervisor, and then he came to Bates as a, he was the overseer over here before I was.

And then, Gagnon, I forget his first name.

Harvey Landry, he was a loom fixer and he was also president of the union over there, the Hill Mill.

And Bob Bouvier, Robert Bouvier, he was a supervisor on the night shift.

And Rene Doyon, he was a changer over there, too, at the Hill Mill. I don't know where he is, I haven't heard from him for years.

AL: Did you get involved in the union at all over the years?

NP: Yeah, I was a shop steward, I was in the (*unintelligible word*) committee, and I was, oh, auditor, you know, the audit at the end of the year, there, somebody audited the books and stuff like that.

AL: So the union, was it quite active and busy during that time you were -?

NP: During that time it was, yeah.

AL: In what ways?

NP: Well, it was mostly for the wages and stuff like that, and seniorities, people's seniorities and protecting people's seniorities in the mill, and not getting, getting their jobs that they, they won the bids and they got the jobs, you know.

AL: Were there any strikes that you recall?

NP: Not while I was supervisor, but there was before that, yeah. Yeah, when, they had one, a walkout when I was in there, people walked out. There was a disagreement, and they had a walkout. It only lasted a day or so. People came back in and, I don't know, a couple people got fired over there because one of them was a union officer in there and, that was not in the union contract, what they did over there, what we did. It was a wildcat strike they call it. That's all I can remember about that.

AL: And do you recall Denis Blais, did you work with him?

NP: Yeah, yeah.

AL: He was like the regional union agent?

NP: At the time he was over all, yeah, yeah. Denis Blais and there was another guy there, Emilien Turcotte, he was an older one, he died a long time ago. I had his two daughters working for me over there. That was at the Hill Mill, too.

AL: When we ran into Fred Lebel earlier, you mentioned bowling. Was that something very popular with the mill workers?

NP: Oh yeah, all the mills had their bowling team, yeah, we'd bowl against each other's team and it was great, it was a lot of fun, yeah.

AL: Did you get to meet people from the mills that you didn't normally work with every day?

NP: You mean, from the -?

AL: From the mills, like people that might not be in your department, would you get to meet them and get to know them a little?

NP: Oh yeah, oh yeah, I've known quite a few from other departments. Like Larry Nadeau, he was, he was an overseer in warping, upstairs, up the slasher department. Noel Poulin was overseer of spinning room up at the Bates Mill. I know a lot of, yeah, like Ellen (*name*), she was a weaver over there, she died four years ago. Actually, she's the one that showed me how to weave. When I started I was cleaning machinery and cleaning looms, and I'd to hurry up and go with her and she'd show me how to weave, because I didn't want to stay where I was. And Harvey Landry, in there, he's the one that showed me how to fix the looms. Yeah, over there, back those days it was, at the Hill Mill, it went pretty straight.

In order to go up you had to go through the, step by step. You started there cleaning, greasing, sweeping floors, then you had to, you went to be a cloth doffer, a tying machine operator, you had to be a changer, then you had to be a fixer. You had to go through all this before you became a supervisor, and

when you became a supervisor you used to come here at the, I came here at Bates Mill. When I became an overseer I had to come here at the Bates Mill, get an interview, and they sent me to Portland to take a psychology test and stuff over there. Oh yeah, I did good, too, up in the 90s, every test I took. I went in Portland, I remember it was a snowy day and I was a little worried about coming back.

Had some guys, when I became overseer, they had some guys, I didn't have no college education, nowhere near, but some guys who did over there and I got better grade and did get the job.

Yeah, a long time ago.

AL: So you said you did a little bit of work in the mill when you were still a teenager?

NP: Yeah, I worked a few weeks at the Androscoggin Mill. I don't know, I don't remember how long it was. I remember the supervisor over there because he's the one that really got me the job, and he was one of my neighbors, George Pacios. And then I did come over here and work in the weave room over here, Number five [#5] weave on the third shift. There was a, the supervisor was Henry Talon, Talon, yeah, I worked for him. And that's where I really started learning, really started to learn to weave more over here.

And then there was, the president of the union then was Larry Goulet. There was, some names, I got them in my head but I can't remember them, he was an overseer over here before Bob Roy in that room, Boucher, Boucher, he was in IE, like Fred Lebel was. He learned, he started there and then he went and became supervisor in the weave room. And of course Bob Roy was there before me in the weave room. And Don Taylor, when I came here I didn't know him, I didn't know him. There was Steve Crowley, over here, was superintendent at the time. Richard Sylvain, he became, he was a loom fixer and he, matter of fact he became a general in the National Guard. He was going to school while working over there, he was in, yeah.

(*Unintelligible phrase*), Bob Bouvier over there, Joseph Foisy. It's a long time ago. I know them but I forget their names.

AL: What were some of the things you really liked about your job, and what were some of the things you didn't like? Were there sort of things you liked more than others about your job?

NP: No, I, I had a brother worked over here, he retired in 47 years. He's got his picture at Da Vinci's,

on the wall. Yeah, real, real thorough. Anyway, what I didn't like about my job? Ah, it was tough sometimes, decisions to make, you know. And what I didn't like is having to chew somebody out. I was 29, 30 years in supervision and I think, in all these years I think I fired only three people. I'm the kind of guy that believes somebody was doing something wrong, you could explain it to him and talk to him and, you know. Especially if they were people good on their jobs, I'd talk to them, and I would never tell anybody to go do this and go do that. I would ask them to do this and do that, which I think helped me a lot through the years. And, some people, they get a management, supervision kind of a job and they think they're it. Well, I always took myself as one of them and, working there and earning the same money, I'm working for money the same they are, work for a living, and I never, well. I think I fired just three people in all these years. I'd try and save them and make them understand, and usually they turn out pretty good employees.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about the mills and working here that you think is important to add?

NP: Well -

AL: Something that sticks out in your memory?

NP: Not, no, working at the Hill Mill, they were more stricter, more quality oriented than any of the other mills.

AL: The Hill Mill.

NP: The Hill Mill. And I think better organized than any other mills around, I think so. I worked in, like I said, I worked here, I worked at the Libby, I worked at Edwards, and as far as being organized the Hill Mill was better organized up there, that place, yeah.

AL: The one question I did want to ask you was about when the Tang brothers bought the mill and what, what were your impressions of that? Did you know them at all?

NP: I got to know them, I got to know Thomas Tang pretty well. Eric, I heard all kinds of rumors that weren't so nice about him. Thomas, I, we went to a picnic, me and my wife and his wife together one time, had met at Thomas Point, and he (*unintelligible word*) just like us. Eric, he was, I don't know, I heard he was a terror to work with, but I never had much dealings to do with him. But when I first came

here, that was the last stretch I worked over here, the last five years I worked over here. And I don't know too much what occurred then. Only know some of the things that I heard.

AL: They weren't, you didn't get a sense that they were investing back into the mill, though?

NP: I never thought they did. I thought, in my personal feeling, I thought they came here just to get all they could out of it and then get out. That was my feelings, and I think that's what they did, too. I think they came here, the thing was hurting and I think they bled it to death. Then they disappeared. But there were here to make some money and they did, at the expense I think of everybody else working in here. I don't think they helped the place much. They did try and make electric blankets when they were here. Was very promising at the time, but, matter of fact I was making them for them up in the weave room up here, in Two [#2] weave room. And they had set up, on the top floor over here they had set up a shop to put the wires in the blankets and the stuff like that, electric blankets. I think that was, I don't know if the Tangs put that shop or it was Levine, they used to own that mill in Winthrop.

AL: Tom Levine?

NP: Yeah, I think he's the one that started that thing upstairs, although I didn't have much to do with it.

AL: Great, thank you very much.

End of Interview

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