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

Fernand Labbe **SMWOH #55**
(*Interviewer: Thomas Burian*) May 13, 2005

Q: Could you please state your full name?

A: Fernand Roland Labbe.

Q: And could you please spell it?

A: What's that?

Q: Could you please spell your name?

A: Fernand, F-E-R-N-A-N-D, Roland, R-O-L-A-N-D, Labbe, L-A-B-B-E.

Q: And what is your date of birth?

A: August 19th, 1941.

Q: Okay, where were you born?

A: Lewiston, Maine.

Q: So you grew up in Lewiston?

A: Grew up, yeah, born and raised, lived all my life in Lewiston.

Q: What were your parent's names?

A: My father was Phillip Labbe, and my mother was Marie Labbe.

Q: What was her maiden name?

A: Brousser.

Q: Could you spell that please?

A: Brousser?

Q: Yeah.

A: Wow, okay, I never use it. B-, I think it's B-R-O-U-S-S-E-R.

Q: Where were your parents born?

A: My father was born in Augusta, Maine, and my mother was born in Berlin, New Hampshire.

Q: What type of work did they do?

A: My father worked at Bates Mill all his life. He had a garage for a while, but most of the time he work at Bates Mill, and Bath Iron Works for the first few years they were married, but most of the time. My mother worked in a lot of different shoe shops,

between babies. We were ten kids, so.

Q: So when, so when did your dad move here from Berlin?

A: My mother moved, she was pretty, she was probably, she was the baby of the family, so I think she about five when they moved to from Berlin to Lewiston. They bought a farm on College Avenue, on College Street, whatever.

Q: Did your mother ever work in the mill?

A: No, never. The only person, but I guess most of us worked. Yeah, she always worked, she, during the war she worked at Bath Iron Works, and most of the time in between kids, mostly different shoe shops, Clap Shoe, Lounge Shoe. She had enough to do most of the time, well she really didn't start working until most of us were starting to go to school anyway.

Q: Where did she work before that? Do you know if your mother worked before you were born?

A: I don't think she did, no, she had four of us right off the bat, so.

Q: Did she have quadruplets?

A: No, just kids. She had four, one, two, three, four, the first few years they were married, so.

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

A: I have five sisters and four brothers.

Q: Could you name them?

A: Yeah. Lucien Labbe, he died two years ago, he was sixty-five.

Q: Did he work at the mill?

A: Yeah, he worked at the mill. And then there's my sister Lorriane Crawford, she lives in Tennessee but has a summer place in Sabattus.

Q: Did she work at the mill?

A: No, she never, worked in a shoe shop, she worked at Lounge Shoe before, mostly before she got married. Then my sister Doris, she worked in the shoe shop also. Then there was me, I worked, I started in the mill in 1957, at Bates in the Hill. Then my other brother worked in the mill, Gerry Labbe, he worked in the mill. We were four of us at one time working in the mill, my father and the three boys. And then my other brother, the next was Larry, he worked in a mill a few, that was way, I had already left the mill by then because he was, there was ten years difference between us, so. He worked in the mill a few months but he never like it so he went to work at Pioneer Plastics.

And then the others, Linda, she graduated from college and left for California, she's still in California. She never worked in the mill. My other sister Linda, Suzanne, she worked, she never worked in the mill. She worked in a lot of shoe shops and worked with, at different places. She's still in town. And my brother Michael is the baby of them all, he never worked in the mill. He's a, he's a mechanic for Ryder, but he took over my, our home on Lincoln Drive. He lived there with my mother, where we were all raised.

Q: Did all your siblings go to work about the same time?

A: What's that?

Q: Did all your siblings go to work about the same age?

A: Yeah, yeah, we had some that were later, like you know, like a lot, a few of them went into the Marines, the oldest went into the Marines and the youngest went into the Marines. But most of us, yeah, none of them, just the girls, all the girls, there's only one girl that graduated from college. She's the one in California. All the rest, we all went to some high school but the last two graduated from high school, Larry and Mike graduated from high school.

Q: And the rest of you didn't?

A: No, yeah.

Q: And obviously you (*unintelligible phrase*) how about your sisters? They all graduate from high school?

A: No, just two of them. Sue and Linda.

Q: And two of your brothers?

A: Yeah, the two youngest. Almost the four youngest that, the four youngest that only went to high school. We all, we all went, we were working. I was in high school and I left after three months, two months, I went to work at the Bates. I was fifteen years old. I had forged all my papers. I made believe I was eighteen, so worked there for -

Q: So you wanted to work in the mill?

A: Yeah, I liked it. But you know, I finally, I worked there eight years. I got called in one year, we got called in the service and we got called in at the federalized, the national guards, I went to, I went to Tennessee, down in Fort Campbell, Kentucky for a year but came back, went to the mill. We were a lot of people in the mill that went, that got called in for a (*unintelligible phrase*). There were about ten of us from the mill, We got called in sixty one during the Cuban crisis.

Q: Were there a lot drafted away during Vietnam?

A: What?

Q: Were there a lot of mill workers drafted during the Vietnam War?

A: No, none of them. Everybody missed it. I come out, I left when they were just starting, but I had already, I had forged all my papers, I got, I went into the reserves at fifteen years old. I was all done at twenty one. Yeah, none of us got, my, the youngest one was in Beirut when they, his whole company got wiped out. It was after, it was when they blew up the barrack in Beirut.

Q: Ninety eighty?

A: Two, '82, yeah. Yeah, he was in the Marines, but he was lucky he had stayed at over night at the garage. He was a mechanic, so he made it. One of the few in his company that made it out of there, so he was blessed

.

Q: So where did all of you go to school, did you all go to the same school?

A: All, most of us, we all started at St. Mary's. Then most of us, after, my mother wasn't that good in French, so we had a hard time with French so by the time most of us were in the fourth, fifth grade we had, we had left the private and gone into public school. I went to (*name*), Dingley, Jordan, Lewiston.

Q: So your mother didn't speak French?

A: She spoke French, but she didn't, you know, nobody got, they were never highly educated, so she didn't know how to really read it. No, no we all spoke French, but the one we learned from, the grandmother, but none of us read. you know, a little bit, nothing, not like my wife, my wife knew how to read and write and -.

Q: Did your parents ever try to teach you French?

A: Oh yeah, you know, we spoke French all the time but, you know, not teaching us to read it and write it, no. Just spoke it. We knew the, I still know the language but, you know. My girls all graduated from Holy Cross. They know, they don't speak much of it but they all knew how to read it and write it.

Q: Your two brothers and two sisters that went to high school, where did they go to high school?

A: Lewiston, all four of them graduated from Lewiston High School.

Q: Your parents never considered putting them in St. Dom's?

A: They couldn't afford St. Dominic's. And I don't think, see none of them had stayed in French school that long, so it would have been hard for them, so.

Q: So you needed to speak French to go to St. Dom's?

A: Yeah, well not really, well yeah, especially them days. Now today you don't, today you can, that's, when my wife used to go to St. Dom's they used to have four hours of French and one hour of English. Now it's the other way around.

Q: When was this in 1950s or 1960s?

A: They went, see there's a skip between them, we went four kids then there was a skip, I'm gonna say, yeah, there'd be, they started going late '60s, they all graduated in the '70s.

Q: Did you teach your kids French?

A: Yeah, oh yeah. My girls all know better than I do. They all went to French, they've never been to public school, they all been to private. They've all been at Holy Cross and St. Dom's, all three girls graduated from St. Dom's.

Q: Do you have any (*unintelligible phrase*)? So did you speak French to your kids when they were growing up?

A: We tried, yeah. They all knew it. Of course, my grandparents, I mean their grandparents all spoke French til, (*unintelligible phrase)*. Plus they had it in school, plus they had friends, some of, still some of their friends. My kids are forty, I got one that's forty and thirty-eight and thirty-five, so, but they know pretty good French. They're better than I am, you know. Of course they had, had St. Dom's and everything.

Q: So when you went to work in the mill, did you speak mainly French when

you worked there, or -?

A: Oh yeah, most of it, mostly. If you didn't speak French in the mill, you would have had a hard time. When I was there, especially when I was there, you know, early, you know the '50s and the early '60s. After that it started changing. Its like today, today you don't have that many French people over here, just the older ones. But even my kids never, you know, they speak French when their grandmother's here. They still have one grandmother.

Q: And did your, did your grandparents, where were they from?

A: Let's see, my grandfather Brussou was originally from Pennsylvania. And my grandmother was, pretty sure she was from Berlin, from New Hampshire. And my two grandparents from the Labbe's, they're all from Canada.

Q: So growing up, did you always consider yourself an American?

A: Yeah, yeah all of us were born (*unintelligible word*). French Canadian descent, but it was still.

Q: Did you ever go to go to Canada?

A: Oh, yeah, yeah we still got a lot of company, relatives, we go there a lot.

Q: Did you go to Canada for any weddings or anything?

A: Oh, yeah, weddings, funerals, yeah. We've got some on both sides. My wife's got some and I've got some, so.

Q: Growing up, did all your friends speak French?

A: Ninety percent of them, yeah.

Q: So most of your friends were French Canadians?

A: Some of them were directly from Canada, and a lot of them were like my parents. My parents were living here but, you know, the grandmothers used to know French, so everybody. But most of my friends were all French descent. I had a few that came in from Canada, like Mike (*name*), he come in here, he was only fifteen years old, the only thing he knew how to speak was French, he went in the mills. You know, a lot of them, (*unintelligible word*) you could live, everybody spoke French at the mills.

Q: Uh-huh, so you didn't have any Irish friends or -?

A: Yeah, yeah, I had O'Brien, oh yeah, John O'Brien on Lincoln. I had a lot of French and a lot of English, a lot of Irish.

Q: So working in the mill, did you stop to talk to people from Ireland or Italy or -?

A: Most, either, or Canada, Ireland, a lot of what we call, we call them upper states, Maine, you know, but they're Canadian but they've been living, they used to pick potatoes, a lot of them potato pickers, but a lot of them we're originally from Canada. We didn't have too many. We had a few Pollocks, though, quite a few Pollocks. All of the (*unintelligible word)* on, they were a big family and everybody worked there.

Q: Did you, did different groups tend to get along in the mill and the school?

A: Yeah, yeah, well we had our problems, but yeah. We didn't care, you

know, we just fought and if you lost, you lost, that's all.

Q: Really? What do you mean problems?

A: I mean, you know, we had fights. I mean, you can't all agree, you know. One would call you some name, you'd call him back and -.

Q: Did this happen often?

A: Yeah, yeah, you know, nobody, (*unintelligible word.* Today you'd be called a racist cause, I'd call you stupid Irishman or stupid Frenchman but, you know, always friends, you know, next day you'd forget about it.

Q: And this happened in the mills too?

A: Yeah, oh yeah. I mean, you know, the culture was still there no matter what, you always had that little, he tried to be better and you tried to be better.

Q: Your wife, (*unintelligible word*) she, what's her name?

A: Pauline.

Q: Have you had another wife?

A: No, we've been married forty-three years.

Q: How did you meet your wife?

A: She worked in the office at the mill. She was in the office, I see her come

out, they used to come out for lunch, right, so I see her come out and I tell this woman, I'm going to be going out with that girl. This woman says no, no, you'll never, I've heard she's got a boyfriend. Well, come to find out that was her mother I was talking to, and she was going out with another guy but she was getting ready to break up, so. And one of my friends in the mill was one of her friends that worked with me heard that I wanted to go out with her, said I'll fix you up one night. So one day she fixed us up. We started going out and that was about forty five years ago, 1960, we started going out in1960, forty-five years ago.

Q: So where did you go when you went out?

A: Drive-in, dances, we used to go to the (*unintelligible word*) a lot. Used to have big dances, PAL Hop was a dance by the police officers on Saturdays that was popular. Then we'd go to different, we'd go to Portland at the Top of the East, you know.

Q: What's that?

A: They had, it was a big hotel, they had a night club up above, and we got up there, and downstairs was another night club. So we'd go out with two couples, we always, every Saturday we'd be, we'd go at the Flamingo or go in to the one in Auburn, I can't remember, used to go a lot to the Roundhouse.

Q: Where's that?

A: Where, now they tore it down, but it's where Ground Round is now. That was the best night club there was.

Q: Was it all just night clubs, or were they like about something or part of something?

A: You mean, you just sat and order a drink.

Q: No, I mean, you, were they like part of a two story building that had like an office below it or above it or something?

A: Yeah, oh, the one in Portland, the big one? Oh, it was about ten and a half, fourteen story up, it looked over all of Portland. Beautiful, still have, I heard they still have something up there, whatever it is. We haven't been in years, so

Q: And how many, how many years did you date before, how long did you date before you got married?

A: Two years. I got called in the service for one year while we were going out, but after I come back we got, I was still in the service when I got back, you know, we got, we weren't demobilized but we got married three weeks after I got back home.

Q: Where was the ceremony?

A: St. Peter's church. St. Peter, and then the wedding reception was at (*name*).

Q: Did your, how old were you?

A: Twenty one.

Q: How old was your wife?

A: Twenty.

Q: Did your siblings get married about the same age?

A: No, my, well some got married, I've got some that got married real young. The girls all got married about seventeen, eighteen. The girls were pretty young. The boys, I got, two of the brothers got married real young, they were seventeen also, and the rest about, the other two that went to college, one went to college, she didn't get married until she was about twenty five.

Q: Do you have children?

A: Yeah.

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Q: How many?

A: Three girls.

Q: Where, where did they all go to school?

A: St. Dom's.

Q: And what do they do for work now?

A: I got one, my oldest one in Georgia, she's a, boy, she's something like an inspector, like if the company makes checks or they make sure you're trying not to do any forging or that, she analyzes all this.

Q: Did she go to college?

A: Yeah, she went to Barbizon College in Boston for two years, for modeling, not modeling, service merchandising, you know, she buys for stores, she worked in different stores for a while until she got that job.

Q: How about your other girls, did they both go to college?

A: Yeah, they all graduated from college. The other one went to college for, no, excuse me, she went to nursing, she went nursing at St. Mary's for a couple of years, and she didn't really like it. So, she decided to go with a dentist, so she's been a dentist's assistant for twenty years at Taylor Brook.

Q: Where did your other daughter go?

A: My other one, she lives in Lisbon. She's gone all they way. She graduated from college and she just graduated for a master, she's early childhood psychology. They built in Lisbon, right here, not too far, about four miles.

Q: She has a practice?

A: She goes, she works for Murphy Homes, Murphy, and she goes, let's say you have a boy that's having a hard time, so she goes over there and studies, yeah.

Q: So you said (*unintelligible phrase)*. So you said you began when you were how old?

A: Fifteen, forged the papers. I was going to school and I had forged my papers to go there. I was going to work part time but then I said, well, I can always go to high school later, so I quit going to school and stayed working for, stayed at the mill for eight years.

Q: And did a lot of friends do this, forge papers to work early?

A: Another one, yeah, the one after me did that, and me and him are about the only ones. But he was a lot older than I was. He was just shy of seventeen. See, they were real strict, you could work but you couldn't work on machinery or anything like that.

Q: Which mill did you work in?

A: I started at Bates but I did, I worked six months at the Bates with my father and my brother and another brother, the oldest brother was working there, and then I had a chance to go to Hill Mill and I went to, which is the next one over.

Q: Why did you go to Hill Mill?

A: I had a better offer, job was, I liked it better. I didn't like it at Bates because I didn't like the type of work I was doing, carding, I was in the card room. So I went in the weave room at the Hill, but I didn't like that either, so I moved.

Q: Can you explain what carding is?

A: Oh you, bales of cotton, bales come in and this machine would, its like all picky, it would pick and demolish all the cotton and it would weave it, it would spin it a little bit, just not really hard, it made a big cotton, but that was before it went into the spinning room. And it would fill up a can. You'd have to break it and put another can under there. You really moved, you had to move. If you wanted a break for five minutes, you had, you had to move around, move like a hundred and twenty cans in, in ten minutes because it would take about ten minutes to fill up. It was a big can. It had a

string loaded. As it went down, it would come down, so then we'd take it, once it was ready we'd take it, put them on carts and send them up to the spinning room. It was about this big. So then they'd take it and they'd spin it and that's how they'd make the thread. The faster the spin, the finer and the stronger for the cloth. That's what they, the weavers would use.

Then I left there and I went into the weave room, and the weave room was so noisy, I mean man, you, when I was working there was no such thing as ear plugs. You used to take, you know, cotton and put them in there but it wasn't like these plugs they've got today. So I stayed there for about three months. Then I had the chance to go in the spinning room. It was much cleaner and quieter, so I went up there, and I was there for almost seven years.

Q: And what did you do in the spinning room?

A: I was a doffer, I was a cleaner for a long time. I'd sweep the floors, up and down the whole length. It had like twenty aisles, so I did that for about three, four years.

Q: What did you say you were before a cleaner, a doffer?

A: Yeah, I went from cleaning to doffing, which was a lot more money but piece work.

Q: And what is that?

A: Once they spin the cotton real small from the card room, you have a bobbin and that's what your thread is on. So, they would fill, you'd have a big frame with three hundred of those in one. Every two hours you'd have to doff it, take out the full ones and put new ones in. And spin, and if you'd have a break, the cotton would break

on some of them so you'd have to piece it up. You had to move, you know it was all on piece work, so you make almost fifty seven, a month, a week.

Q: Well, I've heard of bobbins that were long and narrow and cloth you fed into a machine.

A: That was when (*unintelligible word)*, after that it goes in the weave room and then -

Q: Would you consider working there pretty safe?

A: Oh, nothing, I almost lost my finger, I got caught in the belts. The V-belt cut, took the finger almost off. I put it back. You know, everything was risky. If that thing, that belt would wrap around you. You had big belts on some of these machine (*unintelligible word*), they had big belts going to the ceiling that would run off the main power system. If you'd get caught there, well, my grandfather lost his arm at Androscoggin Mill in 1927. He got caught in of them card rooms.

Q: So what were your hours?

A: My hours? What I'd work? Or how much I make or what?

Q: Yeah, how many hours did you work?

A: Well, I was, I used to work a lot of hours cause there wasn't that much money, but there was, I used to work, like eighty hours a week I'd work.

Q: How many days a week?

A: I do that for a long time, I used to work on nights. I used to work on days, from two til eleven, and then from eleven to seven. A lot of time I'd do double shifts.

Q: How many days a week did you work?

A: Five and a half days. I'd worked a lot of time Saturday morning.

Q: So about how many hours a day on average?

A: My average was probably around sixty hours a week. I worked a lot.

Q: When did you start work, what time?

A: I worked, I worked from three to eleven and a lot of times from eleven to seven, but my shift was three in the afternoon from til eleven at night. That was my real shift, but there was always somebody missing, so, hey, you want to work over?

Q: So you grabbed shifts here and there?

A: Yeah, yeah they'd say you want to work five hour or eight hours. So a lot of times I used to, I could catch, I'd hurry up and do the work and I could catch a couple of hours sleep, so.

Q: And did you like the pay?

A: What?

Q: The pay, did you like the pay?

A: For pay?

Q: Did you like the pay you earned?

A: Well, I mean no, that's why I left. I weren't, we weren't making that much. I think when I left I was making a dollar twenty-five an hour, maybe a little more than a dollar twenty-five, piece work. A lot of them were still making a dollar ten, a dollar fifteen. I could make about a dollar forty, dollar fifty. I think when I left I was making about sixty-seven dollars a month, a week, so probably plus overtime, plus piece, so I'd say about a buck fifty, a buck, people were making a buck twenty five, buck thirty, and I was on piece work so you get paid more. You'd have to be fast, but I did doffing.

Q: And what is piece work? What is piece work?

A: You get paid by the amount of, you know those frames I was telling you? How many you do, you'd have, my wife used to be, they used to count the picks. You call them picks, and whatever they had (*unintelligible word*), the weave room was picks, and where I was, was hank, and you'd make, you'd make money as frame, if the frame was running it was like on a clock, and at the end of the shift, they'd take, they'd take the hanks, how much hanks you made, and they figure out, okay that frame only stopped for twenty minutes, so he did, every time it was full, every, every two hours I'd hurry up and doff that frame, so we'd have the pick.

Q: Was it easy to get assigned to piece?

A: It was, what?

Q: Was it easy to get assigned as piece work?

A: No, no you had to be there a while, you know. Everybody wanted piece work. You could make a little more money.

Q: Did you need connections to get piece work?

A: I bet, well, I went (*unintelligible phrase)*. I went hand sew, that was piece work, you know you get paid for the shoe that you do. It was almost like, the faster the more money you could make.

Q: So how did they choose people, how did they assign?

A: You had to, you had to, they'd open that job, when somebody would retire or they'd open that job and the oldest one in that job, that department, would get it. Seniority.

Q: It was based only on seniority?

A: Yeah. Some of them didn't want it though, you know.

Q: And the room you worked in, was it equally men and women, all men, all women?

A: Men, women. Actually, it was actually more women because it was, where I worked in the spinning room, all of the spinners were women, very, just one, out of twenty spinners I only had one guy. And doffing was split. We probably had like six and four guys. When I went there, there was only two men doffing.

Q: How about carding? How about for carding, was that equally divided?

A: Mostly men, mostly men, yeah. Cloth room and the spinning had the most women, where I worked. Weave room was mostly men, some women, but. Card room, like I said, cloth room was almost all women, probably a hundred women to three men. Spinning was like, I'm gonna say seventy and probably thirty men.

Q: Were you ever promoted in any of the rooms you were in or were there not any promotions?

A: No, I stayed, I like, I wouldn't have gone, (*unintelligible phrase)*. I didn't want to get promoted.

Q: How many supervisors did you have?

A: You mean the total time I was there?

Q: Yeah. Well, at any one time when you were working?

A: Probably four, four or five, you know.

Q: They all speak (*unintelligible word*) French, or?

A: Only one, let's see, Poulin, oh what's his name, Poulin is the only didn't know how to speak French. He had a French name but he didn't know speak it, and all the others (*unintelligible word)*, and all these, they all spoke French, Poirier.

Q: Where they all well liked by the workers?

A: Yeah, yeah they all seemed, it didn't matter, we had some, I'm trying to think, McCafferty, he was, well French or Irish, got along pretty good, you know.

Q: Were you part of a union?

A: Yeah.

Q: Did you pay dues?

A: Yeah.

Q: Did you go to the meetings?

A: Used to pay, yeah, used to pay like three dollars a week, or a dollar fifty a week.

Q: How often were the meetings?

A: Some of them were, we'd go once a month, once a month, right off Lisbon Street, there was a, we had a hall. Blaise, was the president, a couple, I was steward for a while. But then when I got called in the service someone else took over, then when I came back I went, I didn't, I went on another shipment.

Q: Was the union very active, or was there ever a strike when you were -?

A: Yeah, I had one strike, 1958, I think we went out for, we went out for only three days. I think we, they had asked for a ten cent raise, I think they gave us five. Five cents, can you imagine that?

Q: So, did you hear of any other strikes in any other mills when you were working?

A: Oh, yeah, I've been on strike a lot of places. I've been on strike at even the shoe shop, when I went on (*unintelligible word*). We went on strike because we brought in the union, boot and shoe. And then when I was on construction, and where I

am now. I was working for H&G Warren, we went on strike for three and a half weeks in 1984.

Q: For what?

A: More for, it wasn't the money, it was the way they wanted to break up some of the seniority. Seniority was very important to us, still is, it should, it was mostly, everybody, well there was a little money there, but I don't think, the most thing they wanted to eliminate, you couldn't do bidding even though you had been there for awhile. We went out for three and a half weeks, we got what we wanted. Since then we've come close but we never, yeah. We worked, in the past four years we worked eighteen months without a contract. We just signed a contract.

Q: So, have you always had health insurance?

A: Yeah.

Q: Because of the times you got hurt, have you had any sick leave?

A: I've only, I had a back operation for the first time in my life, I had, I got, I went out for four months for a back operation.

Q: Was this, was this while you were working in the mill?

A: Yeah, not this, where I'm working. This time I went out, no I went, I got hurt, I almost lost this finger. I went out for one day, two days, they paid me back my two days, and they gave me fifty dollars. That was a lot of money then.

Q: So they did they pay your medical bills?

A: Yeah. Oh, yeah, they paid that.

Q: They were generally pretty good about paying?

A: Yeah, yeah I never had trouble. Some people had trouble but I always been lucky. I don't collect, I mean in forty years, I hadn't loafed in twenty one, I had never taken a day off or a loaf in twenty one years until last year when I got hurt, my back.

Q: Where you in general happy with the product you made?

A: Yeah, I love the product.

Q: Did you ever buy any of the lines?

A: Yeah, we used to make khaki shirts. We used to make, we used to make a lot of tents for the Army and, but they were on the market. We used to go and buy cloth, in the cloth you could buy cloth and make bedspreads. Bates Mill, you could buy blankets, we bought blankets. We still buy blankets there. Yeah, beautiful blankets.

Q: Did you ever give them as a gift to any of your kids? Like a wedding gift, to your kids, to your daughters as a wedding gift? Did you ever like give the bedspreads as a gift to anybody?

A: From the, where we worked?

Q: Yeah.

A: I've given stuff I get there, but it just, about the old mill, we only had one,

by the time I left the mill we had one job there.

Q: So why did you stop working in the mill?

A: Why?

Q: Yeah.

A: While I was at the mill, I learned how to hand sew. I used to go to school on my own, I took up hand sewing.

Q: Where'd you go to school?

A: (*Unintelligible word*), this guy was teaching, Roger Mop.

Q: So it was private?

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: Did he teach a lot of people?

A: No, we were only three guys learning.

Q: And were they also mill workers? Were the others who were learning also mill workers?

A: Yeah. Well one of them, I can't remember what he was, one of the French guys, I used to call him, he was really from Canada. He was learning and he was working at the card room. I was working in spinning, so we learned to hand sew for

about three months. And I know it was paying good, but I didn't know if I could do it. It's a lot of, it's hard on the hands. You can snap the leather in your hands, so when you punch you ruin it. We used to hand sew all these shoes, you know, all these loafers you see there, I did, I used to do that.

Q: Okay, now I've talked, I've talked a lot about your work in the mills, and I'd like to do a little bit about what life was like when you worked in the mills? Where did you live and where did a lot of mill workers live?

A: I lived, four mills, you could, you had so many mills there you could go to work at the Hill Mill, Bates Mill, Androscoggin, Continental Mill, Lewiston Woolen Mill, Libby Mill, Cowan Mill, these were all mills besides about fifty shoe shops when I was growing up. I grew up right below the mill, below the Bates Mill, Androscoggin Mill actually. We used to have all the, Bates Mill had their hockey team, baseball team, my house was below the hill. So, everything was happening, they even made a public skating rink for us, outside, but where the Country Kitchen is today, that was all baseball fields and hockey rinks.

Q: And there was a mill team?

A: Oh yeah, Bates Mill, yeah, oh yeah.

Q: You were part of it?

A: I was the bat boy for the Bates Mill baseball, and hockey, and I used to go, I used to take care (*unintelligible word)* I was always around there. I grew up with the Bates Mill. Especially baseball, I was their bat boy for, in 1954 they won the championship, they went to Michigan, and I was going to go with them but school wouldn't let me go, so.

Q: Did you mostly have friends from the mill?

A: What's that?

Q: Were most of your friends from the mill?

A: Yeah, a lot of them, you know, before they started closing. Everybody worked in the mill. You're either working in the mill or shoe shop. There wasn't much going there beside that. Either at Continental or Pepperill, or -

Q: What part of town did you live in?

A: I lived right, I lived in what they call in the Gas Patch. It was a big tank, we used to make, we used to make the commercial gas for the people, they didn't have natural gas, we used to make, I used to help them go make gas. I knew the formula to make gas, burn coal and twenty two hundred degrees and capture the fumes that would be, they'd pump that, this big, big, I don't know if you ever got to see it, they used to have right down here where the river is. Used to have a great big, big tank, used to go up and down, that's where the commercial gas would go in, and the weight of it would push it to all the homes.

Q: Did you live either an apartment or a house?

A: House.

Q: Even when you were younger?

A: Yeah, I only lived in, we only lived in an apartment til I was two years old,

and we moved on Lincoln Drive in 1943.

Q: And how about when you started working?

A: I was fifteen.

Q: I mean when you started working, did you live in an apartment, did you live in a house or did you live at home?

A: We had an apartment.

Q: Did you share it with anybody?

A: No, just me and the wife.

Q: And when did you get a house?

A: After I went hand sewing, I was making good money, so I bought this house, thirty eight years ago.

Q: (*Unintelligible phrase*)

A: Sixty seven I think.

Q: Where you part of any other organization aside from the union? Any church organization and political or social?

A: I with, I'm a Shriner, I'm a Mason, Elks, that's about it. I was (*unintelligible word)* secretary for a long time, for, where I am now. I did that for about twenty years. The only thing I belong to is the Masons and the Shriners and the Elks.

Q: When did you join these organizations?

A: Nineteen seventy I joined the Masons. Then '74 I went to the Shriners. The last ten years I've been with the Elks.

Q: Where there a lot of mill workers in those organizations.

A: No, very few, a lot of them were Knights of Columbus. Mason, you should have been Catholic (*unintelligible phrase)* but they weren't too keen about that, they didn't like -.

Q: When, and so how about the Shriners or the Elks, did they care that you were Catholic or not?

A: Well, they wanted me to go see the priest to make sure. I tell them, I never did anyway, but now thirty years later you can be Mason and you can be a Knights of Columbus. When I joined there wasn't, it was strictly a lot of Irishman there and they didn't really understand it. They thought it was to take over the church, you know, the old Presbyterian. They thought the Mason's were going to take over the church, but it was a good organization, take care of your own brothers, you know. I've always stayed with them, so.

Q: You never thought about joining the Knights of Columbus?

A: They asked me a couple, I thought about it, but I'm still working, I'm so busy, I work a lot of hours, so I don't have time for that. I used to go to the drill, when I worked in the shoe shop, when I was working at Nuclear Power Plant I had certain hours I was allowed to, I go to a lot of meetings, I attended a lot of meetings but

(*unintelligible phrase*). Most of them help people in distress and, well you know, with the Shriners, all of these kids that have burns, they have the Shriner Burn, all free. I have a nephew that's had over ten operations just to relieve some of the pain cause he's, he can't walk, but they operated on him about ten times because he cripples up, you know, he, and the Elks, we got the kids, and we got, you, we got dancing over there and we got lobster feasts.

Q: And so, so how many, so did you, have you always gone to church?

A: Yeah.

Q: How often?

A: Well, we go once a week.

Q: Which church?

A: Holy Cross.

Q: Did you always go to Holy Cross?

A: Yeah, well no, St. Mary's, when I was growing up, I was brought up at St. Mary's, St. Mary's, then when we got married, we lived in an apartment and we used to go to St. Peter's, but since we been here we've been going to Holy Cross about thirty eight years now.

Q: Did you go to any other churches?

A: We all, we've been to most of all the other churches at one time or

another, you know, weddings and all that. St. Philip and whatever, it doesn't have to be just -

Q: Is Holy Cross the closest church?

A: Yeah, well that's our parish, so.

Q: Okay.

A: But if there's, like last week we were at Holy Family, you know, a baptism over there.

Q: Did you ever have organized prayer in the mills, was religion ever discussed in the mills?

A: No prayer. Everybody discusses religion, you know. Some were, some were from Jehovah's so we had them all, we had the Catholic, the Jehovah's, we, the guys that don't believe, atheist, and the Protestant.

Q: And they all got along pretty well?

A: Yeah, yeah it was surprising, you know. You try not to discuss too much, you, its like politics, but no body ever got, I guess somebody might have got pissed off once in a while but you got over it. It's not like today. Today -.

Q So do you remember, so most of the fighting going on between was just small fights? There was nothing big like?

A: No, no, we used to have, oh we had, we call them, EL, Lewiston-Auburn

used to have a lot of fights on the bridge, you know, when they play football. They'd call us, we were a big rival. Lewiston and EL, big, big rival, and I see, going on the bridge and fighting, a whole gang. Just five, ten minutes, break up, next day go over there and like nothing ever happened. Especially during the game was tough, you had a lot of fights during the hockey, I mean football games.

Q: Did you play football?

A: I played football, I played football for the seventh and eighth, and three weeks, the six weeks I went to high school, I played football, for Lewiston. I was small but very fast, so.

Q: So, when you were growing up other kids used to make fun of you for being French?

A: Yeah, sure, I made fun of them because they were Irish, you know. Yeah, yeah, you always, certain words we say, you know like (*unintelligible word*), and they still pick it up at the mill now, down there.

Q: Did anyone ever take it seriously, or felt uncomfortable or?

A: I don't think so, you know. We learned, we could tolerate a lot more than kids do today I think. I think, you were so busy working that you didn't really have time to, I mean now they got too much time, free time on their hands.

Q: How, how do you feel about the Somali community here?

A: Our church?

Q: I mean how do you feel about the Somali community coming into Lewiston?

A: I'm not too keen, I don't like they way they came in. They came in for the welfare. When my parents came in, or my grandparents came in, there was no welfare, you had to work. Too much easy money going to them right now, just too much easy money. They don't want to work. They left, they were all in Georgia where my daughter was, but they weren't getting the welfare they were getting here, so they all moved here. So, they're not refuges from, from, direct from Sudan and all that. They been here quite a while. Some of them been here seven, eight years, between Georgia and here. I think if you want to work, if you want to come over here and work, you're welcome. Don't come here and come on welfare. My grandparents had to, had to get their, had to get down there with their own money. Some of these get paid by the government, you know. They're still getting paid.

Q: Where do you work now?

A: I work in Skowhegan.

Q: For?

A: Sappi Paper. Well, it used to be S&D Warren but now it's South African Pulp and Paper. We have a big mill.

Q: Do any Somalis work at that mill?

A: No, you have to work there, so they won't be, we, its way up there, and its hard work. This guy, you know, it's a good job, you know, they pay good but, you know, I work hard.

Q: If there was one thing you could say about mill work to people twenty years from now or something, what would it be? About the work you did?

A: They'd probably be surprised at how the people worked in the mills. I mean, you know, we worked hard, we worked hard. I mean, you know, we had fun but we worked hard, and you weren't ashamed to take your pay at the end of the week, you know. You have some jobs now, some of these people, it was hard work, we had fun, you know. You worked harder to get ahead and always thinking better for the family. This is what made, I guess, this is why these kids all had better than I had, and I had better than my grandparents had, you know. Nothing was free.

Q: So did you save up to buy this house from working in the mill?

A: I saved, I saved a couple years, but we bought it mostly, in them days, I was working, I was hand-sewing so I was making pretty good money, so, and I had just had, we had the second child when we bought, the second one was born here but my wife was pregnant when we moved here. You know, I was raising a family, but hey, looked around.

Q: Did you ever get involved in city politics?

A: No, not yet, probably when I get done. I got twenty two more months of work, so.

Q: Until you retire?

A: Yeah, I'll be sixty-five. I'd like to get involved.

Q: So, are you, are a lot of other mill workers involved in politics, or?

A: Yeah, most of them, I think they all, even I think the ones that are, both mayors I think worked at the mill at one time, the Guays, the brothers, one in Auburn, one Lewiston, I think they all worked at, I'm not sure.

Q: Did mill workers tend to lean toward one party or another?

A: Probably Democrats, most of them around here. I go either way, I like, I vote for the man. I voted Democrat one time, then I voted for Bush the last time, so. I go by what he's done, and the less of the two evils. A lot of the time that's what you have to do now, less of the evils.

Q: So what did you, so what did you think about all of the changes going on in Lewiston right now?

A: Well, I like the change. Some of it's great ideas, I think, I think they should hold back on welfare. I mean, I want to help people but I don't want to support them for the rest of their life, and that's what the welfare seem to breed. They've already tried this, you know, this welfare that started back in the '60s, you got families, generation and generation that have gone through the welfare. I think, I want them to help them, you know, I want them to do it the right way. They seem to go one way, then if you want to work, you shouldn't lose all the help. They should help you, but not if you go to work they take everything away. So a lot of them don't want to go to work, so. But they don't do it right, they don't encourage you, you know. I mean, if you go to work a little bit you lose, you lose some of the food stamps. You either got to do nothing or lose everything, you know, that's, I've been studying the situation on the welfare. I mean, they've gone tremendous. They pay eight, nine hundred dollars of rent for these people, they got eight hundred dollars for food allowance, you know, looking at fourteen hundred dollars

a month.

Q: So were there a lot, were a lot of mill workers on welfare?

A: Didn't know what that was. Well, you had a few people, didn't have welfare then. You know what you had? You had what they call, you go to the city, you go to the city hall and they give you a yellow slip. If you didn't make enough for the family, they give you a yellow slip, and that slip said you could have butter, you could have cheese, milk, bread, and you'd have to go to a certain store. That was on Pine Street, and they'd call it the city aid, they'd help. And you know, if you had like ten kids and you were making like thirty dollars a week, they'd allow you like twelve dollars more of, they'd help you out that's all. They didn't give you, you had to go there and go on your own and get it. And you go, and everything was marked, a lot of people didn't like it, everything was marked U.S. food surplus and all that, even the flour. But it was, my parents did it for a little while, we were like ten kids for a while, so, but you know, just help, you know, the first, just the first few years when my father was the only one working and my mother had all the kids, had like six kids and he was making like sixteen dollars a week. But we never really went on, most stayed away from it, worked harder or got two jobs.

Q: Did family help out a lot if you had problems?

A: Yeah, everybody chipped in, you know. Still do I guess, you help each other out, whoever makes out the best.

Q: Did you ever give part of your pay to your family or to your father, or?

A: When I was, yeah, when I was, when I was growing up. When I was working, when I first started working that's what I was doing, better than half my pay.

My father had gotten sick. They had that big flu going around and he didn't work for a couple of weeks, and I gave him all my pay, you know. I kept three, four bucks, you know. That's why I worked a lot of overtime, I'd give him almost all my pay, but all the overtime I kept. I was able to buy like a brand new car, I bought 1957 Pontiac convertible when I was fifteen years old

Q: So did a lot of your other siblings do this?

A: Yeah, they did that, most of us all did that. That's what kept the family going.

Q: Did you have any other relatives to support?

A: No. Well, we had an uncle, kind of a hobo, bum, whatever, you know. He'd always come over and my mother would end up feeding him. He was more or less of a hobo. Go from, he didn't like to work, he'd go on the city, and the city had, years ago when we were growing up they had this city truck that used to pick up all the garbage, just the garbage, kitchen garbage and the schools. And these guys that didn't want to work, but the city would support them, they lived where they're building the big warehouse for Wal-Mart right here, a big warehouse, that used to be a city farm, that's why they got that land. That's why they got that land, the city sold it to Wal-Mart. City farm, and they'd raise pigs and they'd collect all the swills and everybody, they had, they, you didn't put them in yours garbage, you had a separate bucket, and on Monday they'd come around with a big truck, pick up the swills, and these guys, these people that couldn't afford a rent or room, they'd live in the city house, feed the pigs, pick up the swills, they had a special truck, like it, they get in and feed the pigs. They'd send some of the pork to the jail, take care of the old people.

Q: Did you, did any of your siblings have to help out your parents when they were older and couldn't work anymore?

A: Yeah, everybody, we all took, my grandmother lived with us for a while, a lot longer than they used to now. Everybody helped til they was, the hardest thing, I seen my grandmother, one of my grandmothers had Alzheimer's, it got to a point you had to watch her all the time. That's when (*unintelligible word*) place them at, they used to have a home over here, and my grandparents, they all died kind of sudden anyway. They got sick like a few weeks and died, so. My mother just spent her last year in the nursing home. She had Alzheimers. She just died.

Q: Did she ever live with you for a while?

A: No, no she got, my father died twenty years ago and she got remarried ten years later. She got married about ten years ago. Yeah, they were married ten years, and she did real good til two years ago. She went to the hospital for the first time in her life, besides having babies, and she never really come out of it. She was eighty-six. She died about three months ago.

Q: Living in Lewiston, what would you consider your neighborhood?

A: Now what?

Q: Do you have a place you considered your part of town, that you -?

A: Oh, yeah, our neighborhood was always Lincoln Street, you call, Lincoln, Oxford, the river.

Q: Did a lot of mill workers live along here?

A: Yeah, that's, that whole place was built for mill workers.

Q: Houses or apartment buildings?

A: Mostly apartments, just a few houses. Yeah, we were lucky, we had, we had an old house my father bought for five hundred dollars. That's why we got a house. He never owned the land that's why. People down there, most of them don't own their land, its owned by a big corporation, like the old mill corporation. But it was under Franklin, this old man Franklin bought all this land and then you'd work for the mill and say, hey, and say, I'll rent you this lot. I remember my parents used to pay like three dollars a month to have a house on that lot, but you never owned your land. That's why you could never sell a house too much, you'd pay this corporation three dollars a month all the time. Then it went up to five, fifteen. Now I, here it went up to thirty dollars a month, just like for the lot. Its like a trailer lot.

Q: Your family, did your, who was responsible for disciplining the kids and making sure they got to church and things like that?

A: When I was growing up, or over here, my family?

Q: Your family.

A: My family, I was the enforcer of my wife. Same as in my family, my mother was the, she'd give us a warning and then say I'll tell your father.

Q: So, so even though you, how, so did your wife work?

A: My wife started working when the kids all went to school. My wife never worked until the kids were all in school.

Q: And where did she work?

A: She started working after we got, well she worked at Bates Mill when we were going, she worked there a few years when we were married, but then we had a boy and the boy died six months later. And she, like a SIDS, crib death, and after we had the second one, my wife said I don't ever want to go to work again, so. So , while the kids were growing, she brought up the kids, so never worked for, til the kids were all in school. Then she started working, she was a secretary for the union where I worked. I worked out of a union, I worked out of Carpenter's Local, on Lincoln Street.

Q: So, she was the secretary and goes to the meetings and takes down everything?

A: What's that?

Q: So she was the union secretary and goes to the meetings and takes down everything?

A: Yeah, no, not at the meetings. She'd take care of all of the paper work, and she couldn't go to the meetings but she, yeah, I was the financial secretary but she was the secretary, during the day she'd answer all the phones, we always had a lot of phone calls coming in, so she did that for a long time. Then when I went and worked down at SAPPI, she stopped, she got a job for, she was working for Gibson Card for a long time. She retired with Gibson. She would set the cards up, you know, at Shaw's, those cards that are put in by American Greeting or Gibson, you know, a lot of, think it's Shaw's, but Shaw's don't even pay them. They get paid through American. She did that, it was just, it wasn't a big job, it was just about three hours a day. She worked like fifteen hours a week, kept her busy. I always went around. I worked a lot of overtime, so I made pretty good money. Enough to keep the family going, to put them through

private school and all that, pretty lucky.

Q: Well I think that's it. I thank you for your time. I'm going to need to get out the camera and take some pictures of you, and do you have any question of me?

A: No, no.

Q: Thank you.

End of Interview

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