BRICK WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE

Dennis Chamberlain **#19**
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu) October 3, 2008

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Brickyard Workers Oral History Project at Museum L-A. The date is October 3rd, 2008, I'm Andrea L'Hommedieu and today I'm interviewing Dennis Chamberlain. And Dennis, could you tell me your date and place of birth?

Dennis Chamberlain: Born here in Lewiston, 11/28/55.

AL: And did you grow up here as well?

DC: Yeah, yeah, been here all my life.

AL: And your parents, what were their names?

DC: Lorette, my mom, and my father was David Chamberlain.

AL: And what did he do for work?

DC: In the summertime he used to work at a brickyard, and in the wintertime he used to work in the woods with his brothers, so that's what he's done, he did that a lot of years. I remember, well I was born in '55, I remember the sixties, him doing it with my uncles and stuff like that.

AL: And in the brickyards, which brickyards did he work?

DC: He worked at Morin, he worked a little bit at Dennis Brick, and he owned his own for a while, for a period.

AL: Oh, he did?

DC: Yeah, with another person.

AL: And where was that?

DC: In Sidney, right outside Augusta, Maine. That's when I remember, like I said, that was in the sixties, I remember some of that. I think he worked a little bit at Morin later on, just part time.

AL: But it's the Sidney experience you remember. Can you talk about that, what do you remember?

DC: All right, well it was like, geez, they used to have a press or whatever to make the bricks, and there used to be a guy in the back in his swimming trunks or whatever, would shovel it into the press, and there'd be a guy that would like jump on – looks like a giant step or whatever, it looks like a step – he would jump on one foot, the clay would come down, press into the molds, and these guys would pick up the molds, put them on a little like a wheelbarrow, but they had no sides, just a wheelbarrow, and they'd go down the yard, flip the molds, put them in the yard, and come back and load, and there'd be guys doing that all the way through the day.

AL: And what part did your dad do?

DC: Well, he was the supervisor, because he was the owner, so he made sure everything was running right, everything was up and up, make sure there was no problem with the guys and stuff like that, and just maintenance and refereeing and whatever he had to do.

AL: Right. And I don't know if you would remember this, being a child at the time, but how did he come to, I don't know, discover the clay in Sidney, or did he own the land, or how -?

DC: Well, it was a former brickyard that had shut down, so they had found out about it so him and another individual went and checked it out, and they bought it and they started. It was a small, they didn't make that many bricks there, but there weren't that many employees so they wanted to keep it small and manageable. And they had big fields where they used to cut up the clay, let it dry, bring it into the pit, where that pit would, they would put that mud the night before and let it soak before they would use it for the next day. So that's how it was, it was just a big field, a large field and a, it sat down like a lower area, and that's how they did it.

AL: And did you see them building the kilns (*unintelligible*)?

DC: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

AL: What was that, do you know the process?

DC: Well, it's like you, I remember we used to call those guys setters. When the bricks used to come the conveyer belt, they used to grab the bricks by four and they would just stack them, and they would have like a first layer, which was the most important layer, where they would shape the arches. Those arches were made so when they threw the wood in there, that's where they got the fire to burn the brick. See,

the brick is made with – it's a lot of heat, I'll tell you that. And once that first section was made, after that they just came up square all the way up and leveled it. Next day come in, they used to call it I think scoving, they used to put like an outside brick layer all the way around it, next day mud it and be ready to be burned.

AL: And how long did that process take, a couple weeks didn't it?

DC: Yeah, I think so. I think it got better in time, when oil came in or whatever, but the old way used to be these wood slabs, they used to get them in a big bundle, they used to buy them from I don't know what area, they used to come in on a truck, these great big bundles of slab, they just used to put them, always the length of the kiln, these slabs, about, probably about three or four feet high, and they left room because once you – I think the slabs were like four feet long – they had to leave room for you to grab it to throw it in, (*unintelligible*) along pulls and push them all the way in. That's how you did it.

There used to be a guy, they called him the burner, and there was his helpers, he used to go up top, see if everything was looking right, because he could see if it was enough feed, not enough feed, how much air you would give it. You know what I mean? These guys did it for a long time, a lot of those guys were old guys that were doing it. I remember working with them, they were pretty good. They used to look, they used to have a brick they used to pull out and they just look inside the hole to see if the fire was all right, put the brick back in and let her do it. And they'd go out and check, and just wait and wait, and give it another load of wood every now and then, and that's how the process was, was around the clock until it was done. They had three shifts.

AL: And it must have been hot going up to the top to look.

DC: Well they used to have like, a little like outside staging all the way around it, so they used to climb up and look at it through the staging. They'd gotten a pretty good idea after doing it all these years, if it looked right or wrong. And if they needed more heat or more air they used to come back and either stoke more wood or give it a little more air, and that was it. And they did this process, like I say, was around the clock, seven days a week until it was done.

AL: Did your dad have stories that he told about working in the brickyards?

DC: Well, it was a tough guy's job. Oh yeah, I mean you know, a lot of these guys, it was hard work, I mean you couldn't take that away. And I guess, stories, wow, that'd be hard to remember. I'm trying to think.

AL: Sometimes they're hard to pull out after all these years.

DC: Yeah, yeah, so yeah, you know, a lot of stuff, you talk in passing, you know,

some of the guys, things that go wrong. Sometimes they'd screw up, and boy, they would have a mess. If they burned the kiln bad, they would literally have to take masonry hammers and take it all apart. If you burned it too long, you know, they wouldn't be too happy with that. But somebody else would buy that, they used to call those antiques, they were odd shaped. They were also like glass sometimes, they were unique. But it took, they were hard work for masons to put up, but they had a niche for that too, people liked them because they were so unique. But they were a lot of work to get out.

AL: And so he worked, your dad worked in the woods in the winter.

DC: Winter, yeah, because you know, brick making was only in the summertime, and they'd do whatever they could until the season got a little too cold, because it would freeze, I mean the water and all that, split the bricks. So when it came to that part, what they would do, just take everything that was dry, burn it, and they would shut down for the winter. Next start up soon as spring came and all the crews come back, whatever they did in the wintertime, and they'd start all over again.

AL: And you said your dad went to part time later on, working in the brickyards?

DC: Yeah, he did, he retired but he still used to come in as he was older to fix the molds and all that, because they get damaged, I mean they get twisted or dropped or whatever, and he would repair them. You know what mean, because he knew how, he had a little system how to repair them, so he was pretty good at it. So they would just hire him probably fifteen, twenty hours after he retired, just to repair them and stuff like that. And it would save them a lot because the molds alone probably cost fifty to a hundred bucks, one set, so you know, if you can fix in an hour or two it was – and you didn't have to wait. So that was the most important thing.

AL: And was that at Morin Brickyard?

DC: Yeah, he worked there quite a few years. A lot of years. That's the one I remember most. After he left that, eventually that shut down in Sidney and he moved back here and he ended up working at Morin for quite a few years after that, I would say from the seventies on, later seventies on. That's where he retired.

AL: Now did you ever work in a brickyard?

DC: Yeah, I worked a little bit part time, yeah. I worked at Morin when I got out of high school, for a year or two. And it was a little different then, I mean everything, a little more mechanical with forklifts and, you know.

AL: Can you talk about how it changed, what the differences were?

DC: Oh, it was just the machinery. I mean, you know, no more guys shoveling, it's all augurs, and you had a bucket loader that would just dump it back in the hopper, and the augur would come in, there'd be a guy on top watering it, it'd come out the press, the guy would just hit the button, the press would dump, fill the molds, next you would just flip it on a conveyer belt and it would go down these like, a little like two cables going down, and guys would just pick them and put them in the racks. And after the rack was full, the forklift would come in and pick up the rack and put it up in like a big shed and let them dry. Before, in the old days, they used to let it on the ground and dry, I mean you know, there was no covering on them. At least when they were in the sheds, they were covered away from the elements and stuff.

AL: Right, so you didn't lose bricks if it rained.

DC: You got it, you got it, because you know, every now and then you get a storm, (*unintelligible*), it would just dent the heck out of it, they were no good after that, they have to get rid of them. But that's the change, and like I say, the kilns, they, everything was conveyer belt. The guy – setting was still there, I would say that's probably one of the hardest jobs those guys did, it was all back breaking, they would grab it, bend over, set, grab it, bend over, set, and you know, if you had a set of – it used to be two guys doing it, and they were pretty good, they could probably do forty thousand bricks in a day, setting. I think so, if I remember right. They were pretty good, they could get up there. Now, the number might be off, because I remember we used to go, they used to do like a level here, like stagger the level, and eventually would fill it up. They'd go all the way up, and come back down. And like I say, the hardest part of it was the arches. It didn't matter, everybody had to do the arches right because, you know.

Next came oil, and some would still use oil and wood to get certain colors of the brick, because like they'd try to match what's existing before. That was a big thing with brick, I mean if they stay the same, a lot of like schools and stuff like that like a particular color bricks, the style of brick, so you try to keep to that level, or maintain I guess. So if there was like a hospital building, Bates College had bought a lot of bricks from them and stuff, they try to keep it the same.

But now everything's different, everything's wire cut, it's all automated, so it's different, I mean, and it takes less people, I mean that's the big thing. Because it was (*unintelligible*) work, a lot of guys used to get hurt, sore backs, banged hands, stuff like that, dried, chipped, you name it.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about brick making that you think is important to add?

DC: Not really, I think if you have talked to everybody else, pretty much like I say, there ain't too many left. I mean Morin's probably the only one around here, and after that Gorham, so there's not too many left. And it does, it takes a lot of room, and it's a

lot of, you know, you get a lot of breakage. And just like anything else, I mean, you know, if you get stones in it or whatever, that will break it, like rocks, stuff like that. And too much heat, not enough heat and little things like that, so there's a lot of – I will say, not, whatever we used to call it, not broken bricks but they used to have a name for it – you just had a lot of that, in the drying process and in the finish process, too. You know clay, it can do anything, you know what I mean, the way it dries, if it dries too quick, you don't want anything to dry too quick, it cracks. If it took too long to dry, there'd just be more area that you would have to store it until it was finally dried. So it's kind of tricky sometimes.

AL: And I know when we first walked in, Rachel had mentioned that your dad had come in to help with the set up of a display. Do you know what she was talking about?

DC: No, I don't know where she got it. She says it's an old style one with the horses?

AL: Yeah, I'm not sure.

DC: I have no idea. Although I remember, the ones I remember was, a guy used to be in the pits, and they should to shovel it in, like I say, a guy would have like a big pedal, you'd jump on the pedal and that would bring the press down, and that would fill the mold, and those guys would go down the yard and dump it. Like I say, it was a pretty back busting job, I mean everything was with your back. I mean those guys were pretty rough, by the end of the year they were all pretty rugged.

AL: Well great, thank you so much.

End of Interview
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