

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

**Claudette Jalbert**  
(Interviewer: Alison Pennelli)

**SMWOH #33**  
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**Q:** This is an interview with Claudette Jalbert for the Mill Workers Oral History Project on March 29th, 2005 in Lewiston, Maine. I am Alison Pennelli, interviewing. So if you can just state your full name and your maiden name, and spell it?

**A:** Okay, Claudette Malo Jalbert, and I was born in Lewiston in February, February 21st of 1936. And I grew up in Lewiston, and I'm French Catholic, and my parents were Maurice and Mary Ann Malo, and my father was in the contracting business with his father, and they're they ones that built St. Peter and Paul's Church. And Bates was my second full time job. Well, actually my first full time job, because I graduated from high school in June and started there in August.

And it was quite comical when I had to go for my interview, because Arthur Ford is the one who hired me, and he had set up a date for a Saturday afternoon, to come interview me there. And when I went, the guard, there was a guard at the doors at the time, and he says, oh no, he says, Mr. Ford never comes here on a Saturday, never, never. So I said, well, he told me to be here. He says, well, I'll let you in but, he's says, I'll give you ten minutes, he says, he won't be in here. And sure enough, two minutes later Mr. Ford came up and interviewed me and hired me. And I went in there in the converting division.

**Q:** And what exactly does that mean?

A: Well, I guess what they did, they called it converting because fabric used to come in from Rhode Island, and it was in a, like a big bolt, and they used to cut it up. They put it on this machine and they used to make a smaller (*unintelligible word*) bolt I guess is what you'd call it, and that's what they did in that department. So I guess they converted from a big roll to a, you know. So I worked there in that department for seven years, doing different things.

And at the time, going to work at Bates was the thing. I mean, if anybody got a job at Bates in the office, that was quite something. And it was the best paying. Because I started at a dollar ten an hour. And of course the banks, I had interviewed at the banks but they only paid seventy five cents an hour, so I didn't want to go there.

Q: That's interesting, very interesting.

A: But when your occupation is (*unintelligible phrase*) different, you know. The conflicts between different ethnic groups, not while I was there. I think maybe there was conflict years before, but when I was there I didn't, I didn't notice anything.

Q: Everybody just seemed to get along.

A: Oh, yeah.

Q: It was kind of past that stage?

A: That's right, oh yeah, yeah. But I remember my father telling stories about how it was a lot of disagreements between the French and the Irish and that type of thing, you know, like that. How did I get my job? I don't know if they called the high school, or if I just applied there.

**Q:** Were there a lot of people there your age, right out of high school, when you started?

**A:** Yeah, there were quite a few, yeah, we were quite a few that ended up there. Maybe half a dozen or so, because they hired, what, close to seventy five to a hundred people in the office, so, there were a lot of different departments.

**Q:** And were there ways of getting favorite jobs?

**A:** Well, back then if you were known, you know, if your father or mother had friends somewhere it always helped, you know, to give their name as a reference or whatever.

**Q:** Did your parents know people who worked in the mills?

**A:** Well, maybe a long time ago. My grandmother worked there, and my aunt and uncle, stuff like that, but my parents never did, no. And who got what jobs, well I would say they had to be qualified for whatever job they got, you know. And I don't recall that anybody was admired, or looked down upon, you know, or I was too naive to know the difference, I don't know what. Oh, dear.

**Q:** Were there any ways that, ways that you had to figure out, say, if you needed extra time off, were there ways to work around your superiors to get that time, or was it -?

**A:** Well, we had vacation time. And I don't, I just recall of one incident, there was a coat sale.

**Q:** A coat sale?

**A:** A coat sale. And my mother said, oh, she said, I'd go buy you a winter coat if you could get there this morning. I says, well, I'll call and tell them that I don't feel well, and maybe I'll come in in the afternoon. So they said, oh, okay, no problem, you know, if you feel better come in. So we get to the coat sale, and who's the first woman in line, but my boss's wife. So when I went in to work at one o'clock my boss says, gee, a new coat cures any headache, doesn't it? I never pulled that one again.

**Q:** At least you came in later.

**A:** Yes. But I don't recall any problems with having time off, or, but like I say, I never asked for it that often. But people were, of course when you worked at Bates you were always dressed, you wore white gloves to work in the office, and it was always a dress up thing, nylons and high heels and, you know, nice dresses and suits and, you know.

**Q:** To work?

**A:** To work, in the office, yeah, right. It wasn't like today, when you walk in a bank and they're in jeans and, you know, very casual today, yeah. We were dressed up, you know.

**Q:** Gloves and everything. So did you find that more women did one type of job and more men did another type of job or did you, was it mixed? Were there men and women both in the office with you?

**A:** Oh yes, there were. But I think, I don't recall back then there were very many women bosses. Okay? It was usually a man that headed up the department. I don't recall any women in charge. They'd probably be an assistant or something like

that, you know, but I don't recall that there were too many women in charge of things.

**Q:** So for the most part you felt that the men and women were treated equally in the mill? But did they get paid the same amount, do you remember?

**A:** Oh, I don't know. Nobody ever discussed their salary. No, but I think back then, I mean I'm not talking about Bates now, but I think men in general got paid more than women did, you know. But this isn't Bates, this is just -

**Q:** This is just general.

**A:** Yeah, just things that I've heard, you know. But I didn't, I didn't know of anything like that.

**Q:** When we were putting together these questions, we were interested in how pregnant women were treated. Because it was dif-, especially the people who were at, on the looms, because they're on their feet all day? You don't know?

**A:** Oh, yes, I don't know what happened out in the mill. I have no idea, but I know a good friend of mine was pregnant while she was in the office and -

**Q:** It wasn't -

**A:** No, she was treated just like the rest of us were, you know. But I don't know what happened out in the mill. They must have had pregnant women out there, but I just don't know.

**Q:** Can you talk a little about the unions, and the role that they played in the mill?

**A:** Yeah, see, the office wasn't part of the unions, we weren't unionized at all. And I guess, I guess most people were happy with it, because we'd hear the men talking sometimes, you know, when, and boy, if they had a twelve minute break, that was all they'd allow to be taken, you know. If they went thirteen minutes, somebody would be hollering at them, you know. But I never worked in a union, for a union, so I really don't know.

**Q:** Can you just maybe talk about the most difficult part working at Bates, in the mill? Or talk about a favorite memory that you have?

**A:** See, as far as the mill goes, I don't know, I don't know. I didn't have a difficult department at all, you know, so I don't know. Maybe it'd be the hours or something?

**Q:** What were your hours?

**A:** We worked eight to five, yeah, with an hour for lunch.

**Q:** This was just, did you work Monday through Friday?

**A:** Yes, yeah, yeah. But of course the mill was different, they had three shifts going.

**Q:** Right, and that was going twenty four hours.

**A:** That's right, like seven to three, three to eleven and eleven to seven, yeah. But I really, I wouldn't be able to answer that, it'd be just guessing, you know, because I don't even remember hearing much about it.

**Q:** Did you make close friends when you were working in the office?

**A:** Oh, yes, everybody was very sociable. Yeah, everybody was very, very friendly then. In fact, I'm still friendly with a lot of them that I worked with.

**Q:** That's nice.

**A:** Yeah, and it's been years, because I was there back in '54 to '61, yeah, and we still keep in touch with a lot of them. And in fact tonight I'm having dinner with somebody that I worked with at Bates.

**Q:** That's nice, that's funny.

**A:** Yeah, no, everybody was very sociable and, you know. Used to be a lot of get togethers back then, and they'd throw a lot of showers, bridal showers and baby showers and stuff like that. Or they'd get together at noon time. I remember seeing the mill workers get together at noon time and giving somebody a gift for whatever, you know.

**Q:** Is that when they had their lunch hour, their lunch break?

**A:** That's right, yeah, yes, or a birthday cake or something, you know, I remember a lot of that going on. No, people really enjoyed working there.

**Q:** As far as the working conditions, that really wasn't an issue?

**A:** It must have been in some places, you know, because some of the rooms were, you know, it was dusty and hot and messy and, you know. But I don't, I don't remember hearing too many complaints. It was just like today, there's always

somebody who's complaining about something. But it's not, it wasn't (*unintelligible phrase*).

**Q:** Nothing's ever perfect.

**A:** No, no, right.

**Q:** Nothing too serious.

**A:** It was mill work, you know, I guess people who went to work there realized that, that's what it was.

**Q:** When did, so when you stopped working at the mill, did you stop just because you were moving on, or did it end up closing?

**A:** No, no, it was in full swing when I left, but I went into banking. That's what I always wanted to do, and I couldn't be hired at the bank because I had an aunt working there and they didn't, they had a, what do you call that, nepotism, so I couldn't go. But then when I got married, my name changed. So the man I knew says, well, you know, I don't remember Claudette Malo, you're Claudette Jalbert, so you're fine. So I went in to work there, and I worked at the bank twenty nine years, so.

**Q:** Oh, that's great, that worked out very well.

**A:** That worked out very good, yeah. But I enjoyed Bates while I was there, you know, it was a nice place to work.

**Q:** I'm sure. We went to visit the mill area for class, and it was just, it's empty now, obviously, but it was just so interesting, all the huge (*unintelligible phrase*).



**A:** And of course they had a mill store, where we could go down and buy fabrics. And I got to meet this man from New York, and in talking with him he found out that my mother made a lot of my clothes, because my mother was a good seamstress, so he'd bring me samples. So I always had this material way before it even came out, you know, that was really cool. Oh, he was very nice that way. I'd always get four or five yards of material. And what else what can I remember about Bates? I've been racking my brain, and I just, I just can't think of anything else that happened. Of course we had, we had a newspaper back then, because I was a reporter for my department.

**Q:** Was it just to inform everyone of what was going on?

**A:** That's right, like that, yeah. Or if you had stories about something, or if somebody had a party or something they'd write something about it, and stuff like that. They used to have banquets, too, that was very nice. And what else? So difficult to remember all of it.

**Q:** I know, it is.

**A:** I wish I'd of kept a newspaper, you would love to have seen that. I did keep one for years, but can't keep everything, you know.

**Q:** Right, you have to start throwing things out sometime.

**A:** That's right, and I brought pictures down to Rachel, so I don't have any pictures left either. But I can't, I don't know, all that I remember is that it was a big office, and there were offices, you know, for a lot of individual departments. Like in the main office it was probably, well they called it personnel then, but it's human resources now. And they had payroll and accounting and accounts receivable and payable, and you know, just like any other business would have. But I can't really think of anything

else.

**Q:** Okay, that's fine. No, that information is very useful.

**A:** I mean, if you interview somebody else and you put it all together, then, you know, you have -

*End of Interview*

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