SHOE WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE

Roger Verreault
(*Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

SWOH #036
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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at Museum L-A. The date is December 4, 2009, and I'm at Museum L-A. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and today I'm interviewing Roger Verreault. Is that correct? Can you say your full name?

RV: My name is Roger Verreault. I was born in Lewiston.

AL: And what date was it?

RV: December 12, 1926.

AL: And how do you spell your last name?

RV: V-E-R-R-E-A-U-L-T.

AL: And you grew up in Lewiston.

RV: Yes, I grew up in Lewiston, I went to Lewiston High School, graduated from Lewiston High School in 1955, and went into the army for two years after.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

RV: My parents' names was Joseph and Yvonne Verreault.

AL: And were they also from Lewiston, or had they come from somewhere else?

RV: No, they migrated from Canada in 1919, 1920, and they raised their family here in Lewiston.

AL: So they were married and then came to the U.S.

RV: That's correct.

AL: And do you have stories about why they chose to come here?
RV: Well my dad was working in asbestos mines and mills in Thetford Mines, Quebec. And of course, you know, asbestos is not very good, and he wanted to move

out of that area because of the concerns with his health. He had an uncle here in Lewiston who had a heating and plumbing business, J. Dulac and Son, and they offered him a job. So he came here for a year, worked, and then he went back to Canada, married my mother, and then they migrated to Lewiston, where they started a family, and they lived here all their lives.

AL: And what did your parents do for work once they were here?

RV: My dad was a plumber and my mother was a homemaker.

AL: And how many children where there in the family?

RV: Twelve.

AL: You have eleven brothers and sisters.

RV: Yes, I'm number eleven on the list.

AL: Oh, you're the young, one of the youngest ones.

RV: Yes.

AL: Can you talk about what it was like to grow up in such a large family, because people today don't hardly, rarely, have that experience?

RV: Well, we settled here, we had to be a team because if we had to survive, and there was no help, no outside help, you had to do it yourself. So mom and dad always taught us to be self sufficient and take care of each other. We had our chores and jobs to do as we grew up. The older children took care of the younger ones in the morning before they went to school. My other sister was like my surrogate mother. She got me up in the morning and washed me up and dressed me and fed me breakfast and made sure I went off to school. And the same thing applied to my little brothers and sisters. At a young age we all had part time jobs, paperboy jobs, grocery clerks, things of that nature. Mother and father always worked very, very hard. They raised a good family.

AL: So you would make the money to come back into the family.

RV: Yes, every cent that was made for the children, we'd give it back home to help, and they would give us our allowance. So we learned how to be responsible, working, providing, and helping.

AL: What was the Lewiston community like when you were growing up?

RV: Well the neighborhoods were very close knit. You knew all your neighbors. Everybody interacted together in those days. It's not like to day where you really don't know your neighbor too well. Back then we never locked doors, and it would be very common for, to get up in the morning and a neighborhood kid would be in the living room playing on the piano, that kind of thing. So, it was very friendly and people were very honest, and forthcoming. It's different then than it is today, for sure.

AL: What part of Lewiston did you live in?

RV: On Farwell Street where the new school is now, in that part of the area.

AL: So you went into the service for a couple of years.

RV: Yes.

AL: And then you came back.

RV: Yes, we came back and I went to work for my brother who owned a small machine shop. It was called Lewiston Machine Company. About six or eight employees, and that's how I started. Then a few years later we formed Diamond Machine, which is, today, called, Diamond Phoenix Corporation, and they're on the Alfred Ploured Parkway in Lewiston.

AL: So you and your brother, did you - ?

RV: My brother and other brothers too. We worked together and we had a little repair shop doing different things. In the early years we made some conveyors. We even made yard forklifts for lumber yards. We used to make saw mills, portables saw mills and slab throwers. People would say, what's a slab thrower. In those days they used to cut the log to make it square, and then the outside of the log was a slab, and they used to throw it away, rather than chip it up, like they do today. And we made a machine so that when the slab came out, instead of a person peeling the slab and tearing it off, we made a machine, it was like a catapult, and we'd take a slap and throw it about a hundred feet in the are, into a pile, and then they'd build a pile, and they moved the slab thrower, or they'd turn it around and create another pile. So, things like that. And then we made a lot of repairs on all kinds of machinery. Then we got involved in the shoe industry. My brother made a few machines and conveyors for Knapp Brothers, they were here, and Clark Shoe in Auburn. Then we got interested in making shoe machinery for different applications.

AL: So you actually created machines that would work in certain - ?

RV: Yes, we invented machines, yes.

AL: Oh wow.

RV: We went into machines for the soles for the shoes, for the heels. We made machines to do trimming and forming. Eventually we got involved with driers, because shoes, some shoes, are made wet. They have to be soaked in order to be hand sewn. We made machines to soak the leather, and then we made machines to dry the leather, so that the leather would be formed to the shoe last, which is the form of the foot. We made, probably, well over a hundred big shoe dries, the size of the room. And we made machines to soak the leather. Soaking with done with vacuum. We actually took the oxygen out of the water and replace it. The leather is porous, it's like a skin, and we would take the air out of the leather and replace it with water, so we could soak the leather in a matter of a minute or two. And then it was pliable so that the hand sewer could sew the leather. Then after it was all done, the shoe had to be dried. Normally, in those days, it would take twenty four hours for the leather to dry. We did it in two hours. So it was a great advantage. We made a lot of dryer for companies all over the United States and Puerto Rico.

Then we made, we got involved with stitching room, or fitting room, as they call it in the shoe industry. Conveyor systems where, the conveyor system is made so that you deliver a box of shoe uppers to be parts of leather to be sewn together to make a shoe upper. The upper is the top part of the shoe. The way they did it in the old days is, they'd have benches with people sitting at the bench, and they would bring a bundle, or shoe rack, of leather parts to an operator, and they would sew *(unintelligible)* operation, and then they would move it over to another operator. Well, the problem with that is, it tied up a lot of inventory because the parts of the leather would stay at one position for too long. So what we did is, is we saw a system out of England that would send a box of leather, say twelve pair, or eighteen pairs of components, to an operator, and the operator would sew one operation, and then the box would be returned, on the bottom belt, back to the dispatcher, who would send it to another operator down the line. And the idea was that you could reduce the end process time of the operation of, to finish the, all the operations, and thus, requiring less inventory on the floor, which is money.

And also, we would save a tremendous amount of space. And then it would eliminate wasted time for the operators to go from one shoe rack to the other. They'd have to get up and go find a rack that's what they needed to do, and then they would bring it back. So they would waste two, three, four, five minutes. And this way here, the way we did it is that, you had work at the ready all the time. As soon as you finish one box of components, and you pushed it off, the other one was there, it was there already, as a reserve. So it increased the productivity, which makes the shoe operation cost less in the long run. Subsequently, we probably installed eighty percent of the shoe factories in the United States and Puerto Rico with these systems. From there, we also expanded these systems into the apparel industry. For instance, Vanity Fair Lingerie, one time we

sold them a hundred systems. So it was quite big. And then we went into the high tech industry, electronic industry, defense industry, and we sold systems to all the fortune five hundred companies who were in that kind of business, including Bowing and including Hughes Aircraft, including Digital here in New England, Honeywell and Western Electric and GE and so on.

AL: The burning question I have is, where did your ideas and technological knowhow - ?

RV: We had a group of people on the staff that were very innovative. We were too, because we saw an idea, or an opportunity, and we wouldn't be afraid of jumping into it and finding out what can be done. I mean, along with a lot of the successes we had, we also had a lot of failures, a lot of ideas that didn't go anywhere and they cost us a lot of money. But, you know, nothing ventured, nothing gained. So we were at the forefront of inventing new ideas for the shoe industry. We lasted, we did a good job. And from there, not only in the stitching room, then we went into the assembly area. Once the shoe is all sewn together, it has to be assembled to make a form of a foot. So we went into different types of conveyor system. We started importing systems from Italy to do the assembly. And the idea there was the same that, instead of tying up a lot of material, a lot of floor space with shoe racks, we designed, they designed and we improved, the systems where we could run a shoe, a pair of shoes, through the systems inside of an hours. In an hour you'd have a pair of boots. And then every minute you'd have another pair, or another pair of shoes. And we reduced the space and reduce the amount of inventory that's required. And then we went into, then all of this required storage systems. And we say out there, if you go into a dry cleaner, for instance, you'll see these conveyors with the, carrying your cleaning around, and all your shirts in a wire carousel. Well, we saw those ideas as, that could be upgraded and used in the shoe industry. So we went into the carousel business in nineteen, mid '80s. Instead of buying the carousels, called horizontal storage carrousels, buy the carousels from people who made them, lets make them ourselves. So we designed our own carousel, and our own controls and so on. And we started, within six months we were in the marketplace for these carrousels. We'd go into a shoe company, for instance, Falcon Shoe here in Lewiston, we automated, not quite automated, but we equipped that factory from the sewing all the way to the packing area with carrousels and with conveyor systems that I just talked about. The carousels would store a case of shoes, twelve pair, eighteen pair, thirty six pair, what ever is needed. And it had a bar code on it, and we knew, the system knew where it was. So when you were ready to join all the components into a box so that you could assemble it, you'd go to the carousels and you'd scan a ticket an the carousel would spin and would come in front of you, the box would come in front of you, you picked up the box. Rather than the person walking and searching, and looking, the system would come to you and you'd pick the box, put it on the conveyor system, and away it went for assembly. So, again, save a lot of space, safe a lot of time, and it made the operation very efficient.

AL: And you talked about, or mentioned, that you did a lot of work with Dexter Shoe, and Falcon. Can you talk about those specifically?

RV: Well Dexter Shoe was, of course, a big company. They made about thirty thousand pairs of shoes a day. I knew the owners, Mr. Alfon and Mr. Lund there very well. They asked me to come in and look at their operation to see what could be done to improve their efficiency. And they were very efficient to start with. So we went up there, and we started slowly, and we convinced them to go to the stitching room, or fitting room, we call it, and we put in conveyor systems, and it improved their productivity like, fifteen percent. Then we went into the carousel systems in one factory to test it out, with our carousels and software, and they liked it so much that Mr. Alfon told me to go to Puerto Rico, look at their operations there, and all their factories in Maine, and we started a program of outfitting every factory. Turned it completely around. Subsequently, from about seven years of doing this, and seven million dollars later, some people told me, not the ownership, but some of the mangers told me that the work that was done there, from our company, Diamond Machine, and other companies in New England that also supply the equipment, that they saw a thirty, thirty five percent increase in efficiency. So that's *(unintelligible)* down to dollars. It's like saying that they were making thirty thousand pairs of shoes a day, and ten thousand of those pairs didn't cost us any more money than before. It improved that much. So we did a lot. And Falcon Shoe was the same way. Ted Johansson, one of the nicest persons I've ever known in my life, he was very advanced in his thinking. He was always searching for better ideas too. And he would go from one shoe, one style of shoe to another. For instance, at one time he made children's shoes, and then he made men's working boots. That's a big difference. And he was able to do that, because he could, the systems he implemented, he was able to turn it around quickly because of the ability to change things around quickly and go into new patterns and so on. Within months he was into new manufacturing. We ended up with Ted, at Falcon, by automated, or improving their ability to manufacture from the fitting room and cutting also, all the way to packing. They did a tremendous job. That's why their still in business today.

AL: Yeah, they're one of the last places open.
RV: Yeah, yeah, very nice.

AL: And we have a blueprint here. This is of Falcon Shoe. Do you want to walk me through it and talk about, I'll move and then the microphone will be fine there.

RV: Falcon was here at the mill here by the river. What's the big mill there? Senior moment. They encompassed three wings, plus a storage and a warehouse and part, they probably had three hundred thousand square feet, two, three hundred thousand square feet. Into this area here, the right wing, is the cutting area, and they had all their

leather storage and cutting, and they would prepare the leather and they would take the components and they would bring it out to the stitching room area where they would do some pre fit operation. A pre fit is, after the leather is cut, there's a lot of punching, a lot of skiving, a lot of trimming, that kind of stuff.

AL: Right, right.

RV: And they did that off the conveyor system. And then when that was ready, they would take those components and put it into carousels.

AL: So these are the carousels.

RV: Right.

AL: And these are the conveyors.

RV: Conveyors, where they do the stitching.

AL: Okay.

RV: Everything had a bar code ticket, so that they knew what the style was, the case number was, and the time it went in, the time it has to come out. They would put them in carousels and they would start the stitching operation, the first operation, and they would send it down to any person on this line. That was designated for that operation. In other words, if you were a top stitcher, that's what you did. So the case would come down to the operator, the operator would do the operation, and minutes later, whatever it took, that case of shoes, a tote box, a plastic tote box, would be returned on the bottom belt back to the storage area. It would either go back immediately out to the system because they had a quick turn system, or they could recognize they just scanned the ticket, and they would know right away from the software, that it had a space for it already on the conveyor. It was waiting for it. So the box would go out on the conveyor, and go to the next operation and return again. And if they didn't have a quick turn around operator ready for it, they would go to the storage carousel. Once all the operations were completed, that tote box would go down at the end of the conveyor system and would go into an inspection area, where the operators would inspect the work, make sure the quality was there, and then they would put those uppers into an overhead storage carousel, like I told you, you saw at the dry cleaners. Same idea on it's on the ceiling. And then from there it would be stored in there for two, three days of inventory, ready for the assembly. So now, what would happen is, this person who is in charge of this area, would have a ticket, a production ticket, and it would say, I need case number one, two, three, four, for this style, and he would spin these carousels, and a case of uppers would come down to him. He'd turn around and go to these carousels where the shoe lasts were stored. Shoe last is the form of the foot. And they would go

and spin the carousel and at the head of the carousel they would retrieve twelve pairs of shoe lasts, and they would put that in the box along with the uppers and the soles and so on, and bring it to an assembly area, where they would start assembling. And it would go around, like this, like a serpentine, all the way around, and they would finally do the last operation over here. So you see how it goes?

AL: Yes.

RV: And then when it gets to this area here, they would take the shoes, the last, shoe form, off the boot, and put the case of finished shoes, except for the bottoms, on an elevator up to the ceiling and it would go around to another conveyor system where they finished, either finished the bottoms, where they put the soles and heels and so on, they stitch it up, or it would go into another carousel, because there were two types of manufacturing here. Over here was Goodyear Welts, where the sole is sewn onto the bottom. And over here is where the bottom injects, directly injection machine, polyurethane soles and heels are pressure injected onto the bottom of the shoe. So, if it was injection molded shoes, it would go on these storage carousels and a conveyor system would bring down the shoes, in a box, to the specific work station. It would pick out the correct molding machine. This was a molder, this was a molder, and they had another one down at the end. The box would come down and be in line. The next time that the molding machine would spin, that box was there, the right shoe and everything. So, they could program the systems for that. Again, they wouldn't have to go looking for boots *(unintelligible)* it's there. Very efficient.

AL: Nice.

RV: So here they did the Goodyear Welts, and here they did the direct injection machines. This end here was the packing area where they finished out the shoes, cleaned them up, put them in boxes and ship them out. So at one end of the building they started the cutting for the raw materials, and they did the stitching, and then the assembly, and then the finishing, and out the door. A straight line.

AL: And, yeah, looking at this drawing, physically, it looks like it was created very thoughtfully all in terms of workflow and efficiency.

RV: Exactly.

AL: And did you work directly with the owners in developing this?

RV: Oh yes, this is my drawing.

AL: This is your drawing.

RV: Well my company drawing.

AL: Right, right. Oh, that's wonderful.

RV: Yeah, we worked with the ownership there, and the management. They knew what they needed and we would just put all the pieces of the puzzle together for them, and we'd get it all done.

AL: Oh, that's wonderful.

RV: See, this over here is an in view, see the boots, this is this here.

AL: Okay.

RV: That's an in view. That's a person, you can see the heights they're working at.

AL: Yeah.

RV: So we had to make it ergonomically physical too, so that they people didn't have strains on their backs or legs. We made things the right height. We also had, in the stitching room area, where the operators would suffer from carpel tunnel syndrome, and shoulder aches and pains, and we designed a system where they had a sling mounted on their elbows that had a string balancer, so that it would take the pressure off their arms, like this. It would hold out their arms while they're sewing, and it would help tremendously. They put about fifty or sixty of those in the line. That came from us too.

AL: Oh, that's great.

RV: Note that Falcon Shoe was way ahead of their times.

AL: Yeah, can you talk about that, and compared to the other shoe shops that you would supply to? What made Falcon stand out?

RV: They were probably in the top ten percent as far as innovation and being ahead of the curve all the time, in the way they did things. Dexter shoe eventually got there, but they took a long while until they started changing their philosophy. Their philosophy at one time was, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Which is all right, but you have to understand, after awhile, it will get broke and you need a lot of fixing.

AL: Right.

RV: But Falcon is, the ownership, Ted Johansson was a very intelligent human being that looked ahead all the time. He was the leader in the industry.

AL: Do you continue to supply?

RV: Yes, I still do a little business with Falcon. Falcon today makes fireman's boots. Then their not a big supplies. They're down to probably sixty, eighty people. But what they do, they do very well, and they're very high quality stuff, manufacturing. They do a nice job. In fact, the top management there has been there for thirty years or longer. So I do. I'm retired, but I still do a little business with them.

AL: Right. And talk to me a little bit about, I know you mentioned that your company diversified, in terms of other companies, and types of companies that you supply to. But how did the decline of the shoe industry in this area effect your company? Or did it?

RV: Well, what we did is, we saw it coming. Back in the, even the 60's and the 70's, we hired sales people who were experienced in other industries. For instance, the apparel industry. The apparel industry is, you know, they still have to cut the fabric, they still have to sew the fabric, same as in the shoe industry, they have to cut and sew. So we said, why not bring in our systems to the apparel industry. And we did. We started slowly, but eventually we probably supplied twice as many systems to the apparel industry than we did in the shoe industry. But the apparel industry is probably ten to twenty times bigger than the shoe industry, if you think about it. You wear a lot more clothes than you wear shoes. So we did business with the very best in the apparel industry. Like I mentioned awhile ago, Vanity Fair was a big customer of ours. H.D. Lee, the Levi people, people like that. People who made men's suits, we did a lot of systems. We stored, we made a storage system for the Heart Schaffner Marx men's suits, the Johnny Carson suits, in Buffalo, New York. They had a big airplane hanger, and they wanted to store, I think it was something like three hundred thousand men's suits. Very expensive suits. We designed a system where we could hand these suites on ten foot bars, and we could go up twenty seven feet in the air. And we made, I think it was like, thirty of these systems inside of six months, to store that many suites. But in those days, we were ahead of the time on electronics, and it was very difficult. You could make a physical, mechanical, electrical system, but the electronics wasn't there yet. It wasn't invented yet. So we had a company make us a control, and it was pretty archaic, but we muddled through it. A funny story is, they had this big, big warehouse, and across the road was a t.v. station. This is a true story. There was a t.v. station. In those days, you remember, in the morning, when the station started, they'd have a test pattern on the tube.

AL: Yes.

RV: And this test pattern, I don't know how, would start the carousels. All of a sudden all of the carousels are running together. It was like a - .

AL: A circus.

RV: The watchman thought it was ghosts in there. So we had to overcome that. I know how we overcome it. We took care of it right away, because it cost us five thousand dollars just for a cleaning bill, the suits would fly off.

AL: Oh my.

RV: But that was the type of ingenuity we had. We were able to, somebody would come to us with a problem and we had a solution. Sometimes it cost us a lot of money to do it, but we'd do it. We were very innovative in that way. And then we made systems with robots. Diamond today, it's called Diamond Phoenix, and they're very sophisticated in the things they do. Mostly in their business today is in distribution, big distribution warehousing. They did a job a couple of years ago for a company in the mid west where they put in a carousel system that stored, I think it was like, two million pairs of shoes. You could order a pair of shoes in the morning, on the internet, and they'd be shipped that afternoon. So it was the ability of that software and the carousel system, that was, made it possible. And we did a lot of business with the defense industry. We had Bowing and Groven and Northrop. Northrop that B-17 stealth plane, you see it once in awhile. We were doing a project for there, and we didn't know what they were making.

AL: Top secret.

RV: You couldn't even go to the men's room without having a guard walk in with you. It was top secret. We didn't know. But it was part of that project, and we were involved in it. Same thing with Texas Instruments, down in Texas, in Dallas. We did a lot of work with them. Digital Equipment here in New England, we did work for many years. Honeywell, we had an ongoing contract for five years with them. People like Western Electric we did. We conveyorized every Western Electric factory in the United States and Canada. It was quite something. So we had an interesting go at it.

AL: And were there, you brought, some of your brothers stayed with you in the company all the way through.

RV: My brother was the, he's the one that founded the company.

AL: What was his name?

RV: Robert. You should interview him too.

AL: He's still living?

RV: Yes. He can bring you up to date on previous to me, and overlap my story too.

He started in 1946. Came out of the Navy and started a little repair shop on Bates Street, or was it Blake Street, one of the two. He was a machinist by trade. He started a repair shop and he had four, five, six people working for him. Eventually he, again, he was the type of person that was innovative and he wasn't afraid to try new things. When I came out of the service in 58', I joined him and we started. And then we moved, he had already moved on River Road. From there we grew from eight people, a hundred thousand dollars a year, to ten million dollars when I left.

AL: And thinking about the community, when the shoe industry was thriving, and then into the 80's and 90's when it really declined, did you see a change in the community, or was it more subtle than that? Was there a big change?

RV: Well Lewiston, Auburn is forever changing. A new generation of people. In this district here, where the mill is, there was housing along the roads here, four, five, six stories high. Today that's all gone. So you know, the next generation went on to better education, and moved onto more, different type of ways of earning a living. For instance, in my family, in my own person case, what I did is, my children all went to college and became bankers, electrical engineers, and mechanical engineers, and they work with companies that do hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars a year. So it's not like you're stuck into something. You improve your life as you go along. People, Lewiston-Auburn is diversified enough that new things happen, old things get better, and some old things die. So it's a, I want to say, it's a process that's ever evolving.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you, that you think is important to add, that maybe I missed?

RV: I always try to be positive. I could give you a lot of negatives, but I don't want to do that. I'll say something about the people in Lewiston-Auburn area, they've got a good work ethic. They work hard. I'll give you an example. When we were bought out at Diamond by a company in Cincinnati, they were thinking about moving the company to Ohio, and the ownership came here and stayed a few days, and they looked at the quality of work that was done here, and the work ethics of the people in the factory, and they said to us, we're not moving this company. This is better here than it is in Ohio. So, he says, the people here really work hard, and they do a good job. So they stayed there. So hopefully the new ownership, Diamond was recently sold to a company called System Logistics, out of Italy, and they were in the same core business of material hanging systems. So hopefully they'll stay here and they'll grow here. It could be one of the big companies in Lewiston, Auburn in coming years.

AL: Great. Thank you so much.

RV: You're welcome.

End of Interview
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