

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

Jacqueline and Richard Ricker
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

MWOH# 023
February 21, 2006

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History project. The date is February 21st, 2006. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and today I am interviewing Jacqueline and Richard Ricker at their home at 11 Lincoln Drive in Lewiston, Maine. Jacqueline, could I start with you and ask you to give me your full name?

Jacqueline Ricker: Jacqueline Marie Ricker.

AL: And where and when were you born?

JR: I was born here in Lewiston, and I've lived in Lewiston all my life, Lewiston and Auburn but in this area.

AL: And your date of birth?

JR: November 12th in '35.

AL: Did your parents grow up in this area as well?

JR: No, my parents came down from Canada and then they, my mother worked in the mill also, years ago.

AL: What did she do in the mill?

JR: Oh, my gosh, I don't remember. But she worked in the mill.

AL: And what was your maiden name?

JR: Bureau, and my father owned, they owned a furniture store on Lisbon Street, so my father never worked in the mill.

AL: And did he make his own furniture?

JR: No, it was a, just a, he just sold the furniture.

AL: And so, what was it like growing up in Lewiston in the forties and fifties?

JR: It was very nice. Life was simple then, very nice, and you could trust everybody. I mean it was, people were very friendly, and at night we'd sit on the porch and everybody, all the neighbors would gather around and talk. There was no TV at the time when I grew up, when I was younger, and everybody would sit outside and talk. And the neighbors would mingle, and it was very nice and life was very simple then.

AL: What part of Lewiston did you live in?

JR: I was born on Androscoggin Avenue, that's when I, when we moved from there I was fifteen years old. Then we moved to Auburn. And I was married, I got married and then I moved back to Lewiston.

AL: Do you recall what downtown Lewiston was like at the time, in terms of shopping?

JR: Oh yes, very much so, with shopping. Everybody, there was no mall and everybody went shopping on Lisbon Street on a Saturday afternoon. I mean, you had a hard time to walk on the sidewalk, I mean it was crowded. Busses were going and it was very hectic, compared to now.

AL: And can I switch to you now Richard, and tell me your full name and where and when you were born.

Richard Ricker: My name is Richard Henry Ricker. I was born in Lewiston, right across the street on 265 Lincoln, and from there, what else did you-?

AL: Your date of birth?

RR: Oh, June 2nd, 1932.

AL: And so did you grow up in Lewiston?

RR: I grew up in Lewiston, I went to high school at LHS, graduated in the class of '50, and from there I went into the service during the Korean conflict. And when I came out of there I went to work at Philip Elmet down on Lisbon Street there. And from there, it was the second shift, I was a young married man, I didn't want second shift so I went into Bates, Bates Mill, and from there, I was there thirty five years. Of course I just started right from the bottom floor, when they say you start from the bottom, I was just a helper. And then from there I went into the production department. Then from there I went into finishing room as a supervisor. Then I went into the packing room as a supervisor, then I went into communications department, I became manager there at the communications department, and after a few more years there I became superintendent of the whole department, until I got done. So that's the extent of my life at Bates.

AL: Now, to go back to growing up in Lewiston, were both of your parents from the area?

RR: Yes, yes, yeah. Let me see, yeah, they were both born here in Lewiston area, my father and mother, yeah.

AL: Did either of them ever work in the mills?

RR: No, my mother worked in a shoe shop, at Knapp Shoe all her life. And my father used to work for a Donnelly Signs that you used to have on the highways, you know, where you introduce all kinds of beers or what, he just put those signs up. Until he got sick, and then he passed away. In fact both of them have passed away.

And that was it. I have two brothers. One is deceased, and my older brother, he lives down at the other end of the road down here, so all in the neighborhood. And he's a retired Navy man. And that's about it, I guess, for me. Unless you have something else really.

AL: Yeah, well if we could go back to your time in the mill and talk a little bit in detail about what some of the jobs were that you had.

RR: Oh, well, in the mill itself I was in the converting department which was, they gave you an order and you would fill in that order with bedspreads, whatever the customer wanted, you'd fill it up and you'd ship it out in a carton to the customer. And then from there I went into the finishing room, as I said, and became a supervisor there, and that was all finished bedspreads, all women practically, and all they did, you know, they stitched, they cut and packaged. And then from there I went into the communications department which was a department of printing all prices for your retail and distributor people throughout the country, and we had salesmen throughout the country selling Bates products, naturally. And after that

I went back into the finishing room to become the general superintendent of that department. And that's the extent, really.

AL: When you were at the mill, were there social activities that were connected to the mill, like bowling, I heard there was a hockey league.

RR: Oh yes, yeah, we had bowling leagues, and I participated in. We used to go to a State finals here in Lewiston, and from there if we ever won we'd go down to Boston, in a tournament. Then we had a softball league from Bates, they had a baseball league at Bates, and it was very active, they sponsored a lot of this stuff for us. They had a Bates hockey team, and they sponsored that. So at that time when they were doing all of this, of course, Bates was doing well, you know, financially and whatever, which is just good for people. And that's it.

AL: Now that was probably in the fifties and -?

RR: Yeah, fifties, sixties, yeah.

AL: And then did it sort of -?

RR: It started to dwindle down as we changed ownerships, they started to cut back, you know, just like every business that's not doing too well. And then we had, we were merged with Hill Mill and Androscoggin Mill, and then after that they started to separate each other, and then before I left the Chinese had bought it, purchased it, whatever. And then from there they just started to sell stocks themselves to get rid of the thing, and that was it. Of course today, Fred Lebel, which is a great friend of mine, he was the president of Bates Fabrics, and he has still a little shop here on Chestnut Street, Maine something I guess it was.

AL: Maine Heritage Weavers.

RR: Maine Heritage, right, and he's kept that going, and he has a mill store here on Canal Street, on Cedar Street. So after we all left, he just decided to go on his own, I guess, with a couple of people that got involved in his business. Again, that's it.

What was interesting is, if I recall, the making of a bedspread, which was very, very intriguing. You know, it would come in in a bale of cotton, and then it would go into the, oh boy, oh boy.

JR: The card room.

RR: It would go in the card room, it would go into the spinning room, then it would go into the weave room, and then it come out to the finish room. And from the finish it come out as a finished bedspread. So anybody that came into Bates, who have never seen a bedspread being woven, it was very interesting. It's right from scratch, a piece of cotton and come out as a finished product. And that was basically, again, that's it.

AL: And tell me about how you came to work in the mill.

JR: Well, after I had my third child I was looking for a job, I wanted to go back to work and my husband was working in the mill. And that's, I went to personnel and I got a job at the mill, and I worked there for about eleven years. I worked for a little while in the lab, but I, in the lab, I have asthma and it was damp and humid and I couldn't take it, so I went on payroll and I worked there on payroll for at least ten years or so.

AL: Who were some of the people you worked with?

JR: I worked for George Ormalard, was our supervisor, and there was Barbara Cloutier, there was Pauline Nadeau, Pauline Dumais, Doris Sagrilli, we were quite a big group then, quite a few of us. And

some of them left, came, would come in, left and come back and so, I mean, we were quite a big department at the time.

AL: So was this in the sixties, or early seventies?

JR: I started there in '66, and I got, I left there about '78, I transferred, I went to work at Liberty Mutual and I worked there for about fourteen years, at Liberty. But he stayed, he was still at Bates.

AL: Do either of you recall any strikes during the time you were there?

JR: Yes, there was some.

RR: Oh boy, there was one I think that I recall, and it was settled just before a deadline at midnight, that they signed, the union and management got together and signed a contract. But just before, right after that we would have gone on strike, but we never did. I never got involved in one I don't think, in the time I've been there. But that was the only experience that I have in a strike, you know, people were all getting excited, nervous, you know, if they're going to work, they're not going to work, they find a job, they're not going to have a job. But they settled. And Julian Cloutier was the president of the union of that time, and who in the hell was the agent?

AL: Denis Blais?

RR: Denis Blais. How do you know that?

AL: I know that, I did my homework.

JR: She knows the history.

RR: Yeah, Denis Blais was the agent for the union, you're right, you're right. And that was it, I guess, yeah. Son of a gun.

AL: I know that Lucille Barrett was a union rep for a while. Was she during your time there?

RR: Yeah, that was during my time, she was a shop steward down there in the finishing room for years, and she was with the, a member of the union committee I guess when they had meetings, whatever. She was there for a long time.

JR: Was Irene Bois on the, no?

RR: No, no, she was a sup-, she was later on a union rep but not the time I was there. Then, what the hell was it, Bob, there's a lot of the old timers that I haven't seen for years, Steve Crowley, Joe Lee, Jack Russell, Ralph Nelson, these are all supervisor or superintendents the time I was there. Bill, oh boy, he was a superintendent -

RR: Bob Latah (*sounds like*), he was my boss, but he's passed away. Larry Burgess was in charge of the personnel department at the time, and then Howard Ashby was, and then, oh my God, Walter Satoulis (*sounds like*) was a straw boss, so to speak, in Number Five weave, and he was in charge of our softball team over here at Bates. And of course he's passed away, he was there for years and years. Longton, Louie Longton I think he was, he was the overseer in the the One and Two weave.

JR: And then what's his name, your friend, in One and Two weave there, Maurice?

RR: Maurice Provencher? No, he was Number Five, he was in the weave room Number Five.

JR: And then Tardiff.

RR: Roland Tardiff, yeah, son of a gun, and those people are still living today, yeah. And I, you know, I haven't seen them in years and years and years. So the last time I saw a couple of them was when Bates had their show in the mill?

AL: At the reunion?

RR: Yes.

JR: When they had the reunion we saw quite a few people.

RR: And, my God, I hadn't seen them for so long, you know, they've changed, they got short, they got fat, they got bald. Yeah, and there was John Munroe, he was in charge of the dye house, Gerry Lafrance was in charge of the lab.

JR: Spencer, what's his name, he's at d'Youville now, he's at the Maison Marcotte or d'Youville. Is it Bob Spencer?

RR: I know a Spencer, he skated a lot.

JR: Yes, him, he's at the pavilion or the Maison Marcotte.

RR: Bill Harvey, Bill Harvey was in charge of the whole maintenance crew in the mill, and of course there was Dexter Paquette, he was the office manager.

JR: And when I was there it was Irwin Berg that was the office manager, when I was there.

RR: Then of course they had different presidents. They had, I was thinking about that the other day, too, they had (*unintelligible word*) Fred Lebel, Bill Gleason was a president of the Bates.

AL: Tom?

JR: Was it Tom Connolly, there was Tom Connolly. Well, he wasn't president.

RR: No, he wasn't pres-, he was there but he wasn't president. There's Tom Connolly, then Hal Gosselin, remember Hal Gosselin? He was the executive muck-a-muck, you know, at Bates. And, I guess, but as I say, I've never seen those people since I left the mill, you know, that was of course -

JR: Well, you saw them at the reunion.

RR: Well, just two or three of them.

JR: Yeah, some of them.

RR: So I guess.

AL: Yeah, it's hard to recognize -

JR: Oh yeah, they change a lot, some have changed so much, I mean big change.

AL: Did they, if you think back over the time you were at the mill from the fifties onward, and you said the ownership changed and some of the demand for the product decreased over the years. In terms of like the technology in the mill, in terms of the equipment and stuff, did that continue to be updated?

RR: Oh, no, a lot of that stuff was obsolete at the time they ran. But if it broke down you'd have to, you know, make your own piece in order to keep it going. Because at the time, as the business was dwindling down, they didn't want to invest all this money, you know. We used to have, well, used to have, we used to weave (*unintelligible word*) material. You know the Scottish, and they had the kilts there, that type of

material? We used to do that, and we got set up with all kinds of looms that we had to purchase and all that. But see, it didn't pan out so that was a loss, so to speak, for Bates because nobody was buying the product. And after that it was the old looms that they had when they were weaving, both One and Two, even Number Five. It was just, you know, the -

JR: George Washington, your regular spreads.

RR: Yeah, that was Number One, George Washington. But they made some good products there, they made some good products. Even today my sister-in-law, I gave my bedspread to her, and they had some good products. The 7800 series was what they called, there was four of them. I think there was Lafayette Resist, William and Mary, Wyatt House, these are all beautiful bedspreads. And had an Heirloom. I mean, you work with this for so many years, you know, there's certain ones you remember and others you don't. But that's about, technology, they weren't that, no, they weren't that great.

They made a lot of changes in the operation of the thing. In other words, when they used to cut bedspreads from the second floor, we'll say, in the slashing room, there's a slashing room there, and rolls of bedspreads coming from the weave room would be cut into bedspreads, down the shoot, way down in the finishing room. And then from there they would pile them up and go into the stitchers, Ally, for her to stitch. Washing machine was the same thing. They cut the spreads from the top level to go down into the washers, you know, stuff like that. But it wasn't, we'll say, a thing that, hmm, what do I want to say? Technology, it wasn't there, it wasn't there.

JR: Well, it wasn't like today. I mean, then it was, they didn't have the technology that they have today. If they were still going today, I mean, it would be a different story.

RR: See, we used to have when I was down in the packing room, we used to pack the bedspreads into a chute and just push the chute and it would seal itself, and you'd just pull, the balance of the trap. But after that we got into sealing machines. You just put the bedspread onto a conveyer belt and you pull a handle down and it would seal it and up the conveyer, you know. It speeded up that type of production. And that was it.

Well, they made renovations in the packing room, where you had to go and ship out fifty cartons, we'll say, of bedspreads down the chute into the shipping room. You had to go on a truck, go get them. Well they made conveyer belts throughout the department, so you just take your cart and put it on a conveyer and it would go itself around the whole shmeer and down, so it prevented that, what do you want to call it, usage of the trucks, you know, and it speeded up production for that, too, also. That's about it I guess.

AL: Now, did you live close enough to walk to work?

RR: Oh yeah, was here.

AL: You were right here.

JR: Yeah, we were within walking distance; I used to walk to work.

RR: But I had my own parking lot, though.

JR: Parking space.

RR: The supervisors had their own parking space. Where DaVinci's is? Right in there. So that was it. As I said, I think in the thirty-five I've gone there, I must have missed five days of work, probably sick or something.

JR: Yeah, he was always on, he'd go to work sick many times.

RR: But when you, you know, you like the job and you like the people, (*unintelligible word*), nice people to work with, both employer and employees.

JR: Well, workers were very dependable, you could depend on them. They'd be on the job every day. I heard a story once at the mill, one man retired and he had been there for a long, long time. The story went that came Mon-, he retired on Friday, came Monday morning he got ready and he was walking to work, he didn't realize he was retired. See, that's how dedicated they were.

RR: Then I recall, I recall one time back in the fifties I think it was, Bates celebrated an anniversary. And I think they had either Bob Hope at the Lewiston High Armory or a big name band, they were celebrating their anniversary. And that was a good thing that they had for the employees, you know. As I say, go back thirty some odd years and try to remember everything, you know. But basically I loved it. I'd still be there today if it wasn't for the Chinks.

JR: The Chinks.

RR: Yeah, well, anyway, the Chinese people. Because -

JR: Well, now you'd be retired probably.

RR: Oh yeah, but still.

JR: You would have retired there.

RR: Yeah, yeah.

AL: Tell me from the perspective of somebody who didn't, wasn't here at that time, what was it like when they changed shifts at the mill? And because so many people walked, wasn't it (*unintelligible word*)?

JR: Yes, and it was busy.

RR: Well, a lot of people from around Lincoln Street, Oxford Street, River Street, Canal Street, we used to have the buildings there, where the banks are there today and all that, the banks and the (*unintelligible word*) and all. Those, all the people were all within the walking distance of the mill, all three mills. Over there the Androscoggin and the Hill, and of course the shifts was from seven to three. And then at 2:30, the second shift people were lined outside waiting to go in, for the first shift people to come out. So it was congested around there. But it was -

JR: And there was three shifts going at the time.

RR: Yeah, and it was nice to see these people coming off the bridge, I'm talking about Bates now, coming off the bridge, going home, and then you'd see the second shift coming in. And the same would apply in the morning. At seven o'clock in the morning, from the third shift, they'd come out, first shift would go in at seven until three.

JR: And I understand way back there when they had those buildings on Canal Street, they had the Bates Block, the Androscoggin Block, the Hill Block, I understand, I wasn't here, I wasn't born yet, but they said that they had built those buildings for people that migrated from Canada to come and work in the mills here, and that's why they had those apartments for those people that came in to work for the mills. Yeah, then it was busy, I mean really busy.

AL: And how many brothers and sisters did you have/

JR: I have only one brother, yeah. And my brother never worked in the mill. Yes he did, for a while, yes, he was working in the mill and then he went, he's an electrician so he left to be an electrician. But he

did work in the mill for a while. And my daughter worked a little while for him, Sharon, and my son worked in the office for a while. Yeah, my son and one of my daughters worked at Bates.

RR: So you either had, you know, the textile industry or the shoe industry, that's the only two occupations that were available here at the time. As I said, I remember, well I remember, I was a little kid, the Grand Trunk, people coming in from the train from Canada, getting off and, you know, finding themselves little apartments, like she said, on Canal Street there to work in the mill.

JR: They used to come, they came here to work in the mill. Yeah, life was simple then, it was nice. Compared to now.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about the mills or your time working there that you think would be important or interesting to add?

RR: No, I've said all I had to say. I did different jobs and -

JR: Then I worked on payroll, it was more for taking care of the people's wages.

RR: Because what we would do, the office people anyways, at noon time we would go and, say, eat at the bowling alley that was there right across the street from the mill, which isn't there any more, and then we used to go to Simone's and Marco's, and then we'd come back from lunch and there's a little shack outside the bridge, and we'd all congregate there from about quarter of one to one o'clock, shoot the breeze over everything in general.

JR: And then they'd come in and we used to say in the office, here comes the Mafia. They used to congregate in that little shack there by the bridge at noon time, and then they'd come in to work at one o'clock, come back to work. That was the office people, you know, it wasn't like, the mill was three shifts (*unintelligible phrase*).

RR: Did you know Ray Vallerant? There was Ray Vallerant, is it Ray Vallerant?

JR: You forgot Fern, Fern Pelletier was a designer.

RR: Fern, yeah, Fern Pelletier, (*unintelligible phrase*). Ray Vallerant, where the hell did I get Ray Vallerant? Anyways, Fern Pelletier, he was a great, great friend of ours.

JR: He was a designer, he designed the bedspreads. He was a very talented man.

RR: Yeah, oh, yeah, I guess, with a brush he could do anything, and he made up all these designs for the bedspreads that we have, you know.

AL: And Ray D'Amour?

JR: Ray D'Amour, that's it, Ray D'Amour.

RR: That's the one where I couldn't say it, Ray D'Amour, yes, he was a designer also, yeah.

AL: And I interviewed him.

JR: Oh, you did?

RR: Okay, he was good.

JR: Well, Fern passed away, I mean Fern is not around any more.

RR: But outside of that, outside interests of the mill itself, we used to have a card game on a Friday

night, Fred Lebel, Howard Ashby, Roger Bois who was, he was in, he made the fringe, he made the fringe. And him, he's in Florida now. And there was Al Seahood (*sounds like*) who was in charge of the credit union at that time, Bates credit union.

JR: Yeah, at that time Bates had their own credit union (*unintelligible phrase*).

RR: And myself. We were six of us, every Friday we'd play together, you know, Hearts, the name of the game was Hearts. So it was, it's something that we always try to keep in contact with, you know, every once in a while. But I think that was the end of my thing, I guess.

AL: Did you have anything else?

JR: No, like I said, payroll was very quiet. I mean, all we did was figure the employees' pay.

AL: Now, did Nancy Higgins work in your area?

RR: She worked for me.

AL: Oh, she worked for you, okay.

RR: Yeah, she worked, she was a stitcher.

JR: Now, is she the one that works with Fred?

RR: She's the one that's co-owner of the mill store I guess, with Fred or whatever.

JR: Yeah, okay.

RR: Yeah, in fact I saw her there at the gathering. Yeah, that's it I guess, honey.

JR: What was her name, Fred's secretary there, she was tall?

RR: Kay Marshall.

JR: Kay Marshall, that was Fred Lebel's secretary.

RR: Well, she was there when Curtis was there.

JR: She was there a long time.

RR: Oh yeah, she was, you go through her before you go to see the president. (*Unintelligible phrase*) executive -

JR: She was the executive secretary.

RR: Nice lady.

JR: Very nice lady, yeah.

AL: Great, thank you very much.

JR: You're welcome.

*End of Interview
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