

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

**Irene Berube**  
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

**BCOH# 004**  
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**Andrea L'Hommedieu:** This is an interview with Irene Berube on June 27th, the year 2005, at her home at 209 Pine Street in Lewiston. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and this is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History project. Mrs. Berube, could you start just by giving me your full name, including your maiden name?

**Irene Berube:** Irene Charest, my first name before I got married, and Irene Berube, my married name.

**AL:** And how do you spell Charest?

**IB:** C-H-A-R-E-S-T.

**AL:** And where and when were you born?

**IB:** I was born in Tifford Mine, Canada.

**AL:** And when did you come, did you grow up in Canada?

**IB:** I was four years old when I came to this country.

**AL:** So your parents brought you.

**IB:** Yeah.

**AL:** How many brothers and sisters did you have?

**IB:** Five, five kids, with me, five children.

**AL:** And did they come, your parents, come here to work in the mills?

**IB:** Oh yes, my father came here on a Thursday, and Monday morning he went to work at the Bates Mill.

**AL:** So he must have heard in Canada that this was a place to go for work.

**IB:** He had a letter from somebody, he had received a letter from somebody that he could come over, that he would be hired right off. I think probably the person talked to the boss, you know, told him that they knew somebody that would come in.

**AL:** And this was, what, around 1920, do you think?

**IB:** Oh, I wouldn't, too young to remember. But it's quite a while ago.

**AL:** And did your father and mother have other family that had come here already, or were they the first?

**IB:** A friend.

**AL:** Friend.

**IB:** And neighbors, from where they came from.

**AL:** And what were your parents' names?

*(Pause in taping.)*

**AL:** So what part of the mill did your dad work in when he got a job?

**IB:** The card room, when he first came in. Then he changed job after a while.

**AL:** And what is the card room, what did they do in that part?

**IB:** I'm not too sure. No, I know it's where, a lot of waste in there, I mean the dust, you know?

**AL:** And how many years, do you remember how many years he worked in the mill?

**IB:** Oh, he worked there quite a while, yeah, quite a while, 'til he was old enough to get stuck getting sick, you know.

**AL:** So were you and he both working at the mill at the same time?

**IB:** Oh no, no, no, no. No, no, no, no. Because I was young, I was only four when we got here and he started to work there right off.

**AL:** So about 1930 you started to work at the mill.

**IB:** I started to work at the Androscoggin Mill, and I worked there for, oh, I'd say about nine years. And then while work started to be slow, so they were letting some people go, and I went to work at the Bates Mill. But before that, I was thrown out of the mill because I wasn't of age.

**AL:** Oh, yeah, you said you were fourteen. And what happened, how did you get caught?

**IB:** We were supposed to be sixteen years old to work, and we didn't have no paper to file or nothing. All they did, ask us our name and address, and you said a little lie about sixteen, you know, yeah, and they give you a job right off. They needed people to work. And we were nine girls that was under age. And they call her, I think it's something like principal of school, it's a name like that in French, and she'd go around and she'd see kids on the street that are not in school and they're young, she goes after them to, you know, see why they're not in school.

So she came in the mill and she went around, and two little girl ran in the ladies room, and you could see on the floor underneath, but you couldn't see no leg, no feet, no nothing. So, they had their two feet on the bowls and they were leaning against the wall, so she got mad and she went to see the boss and she says, I'm not going to run after your kids, she says, they're in the ladies room, she says. You've got quite a few over here, she says, I can see by looking at them that they're too young. So, she says, I want their birth certificate. So we had a day or two to bring our birth certificate in, and I didn't bring any because I didn't have it. I was too young, so I told the boss, I says, I'll be going home, I says, they're throwing me out, I'm going. So I went home.

And when I was a little bit older, and you know, I had only about four or five months to go to make me sixteen years, but I went back to the Bates Mill.

**AL:** And what, did you have the same kind of job?

**IB:** No, down there I was working on the rayon, like a silk, you know, rayon, and at the Bates Mill I was working on cotton. I was working for the fringe, you know, the fringe they put around the blanket?

**AL:** And you were in the winding room?

**IB:** Yeah.

**AL:** What is the winding room, what goes on in that room? Is that where the -?

**IB:** Well, it's either the comb comes in, or the spool, and what we do is we wind that to twist it more, so it would be better twisted, you know? Yeah, that's what we were doing.

**AL:** Did you have to do so many a day, or how did they check your productivity?

**IB:** They checked the truck we made, and how many package of comb, how many combs we take out in one night. It was marked down. They checked that every night.

**AL:** Yeah?

**IB:** Oh yeah, couldn't get away with it.

**AL:** Was it hard work?

**IB:** Well, hard enough, hard enough. You're on your feet for eight hours, and after making a few hours at home, you know? You take care of a house and kids, and do eight hours in the mill. You get home, you're tired. Your feet burn, yeah.

**AL:** Did you always stay on the same shift, or did you -?

**IB:** No, I started by the second, and then I went on the third, and then I, after a while I went back on the second. And then there was an opening, somebody left a job, and I had the chance to go on the first shift, and I went.

**AL:** Is first shift 8:00 to 4:00?

**IB:** It was 7:00 to 3:00, and the second shift is 3:00 to 11:00, and 11:00 to 7:00. And that was better for me on the second, because my kids were small and my husband could keep them at night. I had a woman in the same building looking after them 'til my husband come home from work, about half an hour, an hour, and then he took over.

**AL:** How many kids did you have?

**IB:** I have four children, two boys and two girls. Eighteen grandchildren, twenty three great grandchildren, seven, maybe eight, there's another one coming in, great-great-great grandchildren.

**AL:** Isn't that amazing, how they multiply?

**IB:** Yeah. I said that one Christmas, I says, oh my gosh, I told my husband, I says, it's you and me that started all those people that are over here. Oh yeah, yeah, I got a big family.

**AL:** Did your husband work in the mill also?

**IB:** He worked at the Pepperill Bleachery, you know? He was cutting sheet, yeah, and during the war they was working on, like gabardine to make the suit for the soldiers. He worked there a long time.

**AL:** And were there social activities that went on at the mills outside of work time? Like, were there

dances or picnics?

**IB:** Oh, in the summer, at the Bates Mill in the summer time they had a picnic. I don't remember, near Tacoma someplace, I don't remember. Yeah, you buy a ticket and you go up there, and they'd sell beer and you had lunch, hot dogs, free hot dogs and hamburg, you know, once a year.

**AL:** And there were sports teams at the mills, too.

**IB:** Yeah, but I didn't -

**AL:** Didn't participate?

**IB:** No, not at all, not at all. And we had a credit union that I liked, it was cashing my check every month, I mean every week, you know.

**AL:** Were there mostly Franco-Americans?

**IB:** Oh, they was talking French all over, yeah, when I first went in, yeah. But after a while, well they, you know, they started talk English. And it's hard to talk English, because on one side one girl talked French, and the other side the girl talked English, and there you go, buh-buh, buh-buh, you know? Yeah, and that's why we mix all our language. French is all mixed up. We talk half French, half English.

**AL:** I've heard that before, and I wondered how you all do it.

**IB:** Oh yeah, well, I'll be talking to you and I throw some English words in there, and I'd be talking French and I'd say something in English.

**AL:** So growing up, your family at home all spoke French? And you learned some English when you went to school?

**IB:** When I went to school, and when I play outside. In the house it was all French because my parents didn't understand one word of English. Not a bit. They couldn't help me at all with my homework, so that's why I went to work.

**AL:** Did your parents have other family that came to this area after them?

**IB:** No, but they, like I told you, they had some friends and neighbors, you know. He sold his farm to come down here. Didn't have a big farm, but, you know, like he said, I'm taking all that money to pay for the train and the transport of the furniture. He could have bought some new furniture over here, but you know, they didn't want to let go of nothing.

**AL:** What area of Lewiston or Auburn did you live in growing up?

**IB:** Lincoln. A lot of people went to that little, they call it Petit [Little] Canada, you know?

**AL:** Yeah.

**IB:** Yeah, they all went there. But we happened to be lucky, we had a rent over there on Lincoln Street and about, oh, about I'd say two months, my father bought a little house not far, on Lincoln Street. I was brought up on Lincoln Street.

**AL:** Was that a busy neighborhood? There must have been lots of kids around.

**IB:** There was a lot of kids, a lot of kids to play with. You'd go outside and there was always somebody there. And I went to St. Mary's School, St. Mary's Church.

**AL:** Now, your parents probably didn't have a car when you were going up?

**IB:** Oh no, we didn't have no car, no telephone, no electricity. We had a lamp, for a long time, yeah, oh yeah. And we were not the only one. Everybody was like that.

**AL:** So you walked to wherever you wanted to go.

**IB:** Oh, we walked to work, and walked to the hospital, walked to go shopping, walked everywhere. Which was good for our health, much better than riding all the time. Today you can't go across the street, you take the car. Oh yeah, we didn't, my father never drove a car, never. And they never learned English. I don't know, couldn't do it I guess.

**AL:** Did you have a group of friends that you played with?

**IB:** Oh yeah, we got together, the people that all came from Canada, we'd get together, some Saturday nights when somebody was having a birthday or something, and make a little party, you know. They'd play harmonica. Oh yeah, some played the violin, and then make it, you know, joyful as we could.

**AL:** Did they have songs that they brought here?

**IB:** Oh yeah, yeah, they sang Alouette. Oh yeah, they got plenty of French song, yeah. Some funny, and some good ones, you know.

**AL:** Did they play cards at all?

**IB:** Yeah, they did. My father was a checker player, he used to like to play checker, he had four or five men come to the house and watch. They'd sit on the porch and they'd play checker, and he didn't want nobody to talk. He didn't want to be disturbed, you know. Thought he was going to win a hundred dollar, the way he was acting.

**AL:** When you were at the mill, did you have a group of friends that you were close to?

**IB:** Oh yeah, oh yes, I'd invite them up my house, yeah. I've got some picture of them at the house, some of the girls that's in the picture there. It was Christmas time, we got together and picked name, and we each brought a little gift, you know.

**AL:** You had showed me a couple tools earlier. Can you talk about them a little bit, what they were used for?

**IB:** Well, that's for the weave room, and I don't, never worked in the weave room. But that's to pull the thread, that's for sure, you know, because they're hooked.

**AL:** Right, so if your hand couldn't reach in, you could use that.

**IB:** Yeah, but that's mostly for the weave room.

**AL:** And you were in the winding room.

**IB:** They call that a weaver's hook, weaver's hook, yeah, all weavers had one like that. But that was made just specially just, you know.

**AL:** Were there a lot of safety?

**IB:** Well, fair enough.

**AL:** Yeah?

**IB:** Oh yeah, I don't remember anybody getting hurt. Not while I was there.

**AL:** Was the winding room mostly female?

**IB:** Yes, mostly working, yeah, but they, we had to have a man to push the truck, you know, bring it, go downstairs and get like the comb or the spools or whatever, and bring it, take it to the elevator and bring it up, and then bring it to our place where we were working. Oh yeah, they had to have a few men, and they had to have a, what they called a fixer, you know, fix the machine if it breaks down, he's the one that comes over and fix it. And we had the man that cleans the floor sometimes, by, with a big brush, you know.

**AL:** Were there any Irish that worked in your area? Or was it mostly French?

**IB:** Oh, there was some people that would talk English, oh yeah. It got mixed up after a while. Oh yeah, not all French. And I knew a woman that worked with me, she started to work at the Bates Mill, she was eleven.

**AL:** Eleven?

**IB:** Eleven years old, and I don't know if it was, his name was Willie, I think it was Willie Moreau, his name is Moreau, he was nine years old when he got to work at the Bates Mill. And he always stayed there, but her, she left. She came back, after a while she came back. And him, he became the foreman, he was there long enough that he became a foreman. But that was child abuse.

**AL:** Yeah, nine years old.

**IB:** It was worse than me, me it was fourteen, you know, that's not bad. Yeah, nine years old and eleven. She told me she was eleven when she started to work. They were working, what they call the spinning room, and they would fix all the work and they would be like two or three hours without doffing. Doffing is taking all those spools, the bobbins off and put some more in, you know, so in the meantime they would rest, you know, they would take a break. And she said they had a blanket there, they'd lay down on that, take a nap.

Well, they don't do that now. No more, no more. After the teachers, when the, that woman, she was like a policewoman. Yeah, she, but they called her the school principal. I don't know why, but they called her the school principal, and when she was coming everybody was running, you know, even outside. The kids would see her car and they'd, they'd run, they'd go hide (*unintelligible phrase*). They were afraid of her.

**AL:** Are there any stories you recall, or funny things that happened when you worked in the mills that you want to talk about on tape?

**IB:** No, nothing was funny. No, I don't remember there was anything funny there.

**AL:** Did you feel that the bosses, the supervisors, treated you well? Or were there (*unintelligible word*)?

**IB:** Yes, all of them. There were different ones at different time, and I was satisfied with everybody, you know, they respected us, we respected them, and we got along just fine, never had no problem with nobody. I was one of the lucky one.

Well, some of them, they had argument, you know, oh yeah. They go in the office and a certain thing they don't like, you know, they tell the boss. But me, I never had no problem.

**AL:** Did you belong to the union at all?

**IB:** Oh yeah, I was like everybody else, I join in the union.

**AL:** Did any of your children work in the mill?

**IB:** My son worked for a little while, but he didn't work long. Just a couple of months on this job, keep going, you know. Just like me, when I was all done at the Bates, you know, I mean the Androscoggin Mill, I was waiting to go back there, but it was so slow that I had a chance to go to the other place and I took it.

No, I don't remember of anything.

**AL:** Is there anything else? Something I haven't asked you that you think would be important to talk about in terms of the mills and your time there?

**IB:** No, I don't think so.

**AL:** Thank you very much.

**IB:** Okay.

*End of Interview  
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