SHOE WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE

Herb Koss **SWOH #034**
(*Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu*) October 28, 2009

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at Museum L-A. The date is October 28th, 2009, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Today I'm interviewing Herb Koss at his home in Lewiston. Herb, could you start just by giving me your full name?

HK: Well, my full name is Herbert Koss, K-O-S-S.

AL: And where and when were you born?

HK: I was born January 11, 1937, right here in Lewiston. (*Aside: '35, Herb*) Oh, '35, that's right. You were born in '37.

AL: So you were born right here in Lewiston. Your parents, where were they from?

HK: Well both my mother and father were immigrants from Russia. My father came from Russia to Haverhill, Massachusetts, and my mother migrated into New Bedford, Massachusetts.

AL: As young people? Were they grown?

HK: Yeah, no, they were grown. My father was about twelve years old, and my mother came as a baby, brought over by her parents.

AL: And how did they meet?

HK: Well, that's interesting. My father's family had a summer home in Salisbury, Massachusetts that they rented, and my mother was up there visiting one day, with her family, and he saw her and wanted to be introduced to her, and she didn't want anything to do with him because he was kind of a roughneck, in those days, from Haverhill. An old time shoe manufacturer. But eventually they got together and they fell in love, and they were married in Massachusetts, in Brookline, Mass.

AL: Okay. So your father was the first in your family to get involved in the shoe industry?

HK: Not really. His brother, he had a brother that also was working in the shoe factory. He started off as what they call a block cutter in a shoe factory in Haverhill. That's in the cutting room. In those days, they didn't have clickers or hydraulic machines to cut the leather. They used to have a mallet, and they'd put the dies over the leather and then they, brute force, they would hit the die with the mallet, and then the pieces would be cut out. And that's how he started in the shoe business. Then he started selling the scraps from the leather to, they used to grind it up and make other materials from it. And that's how he stared in his own business.

AL: Is this your father or your -?

HK: My father and his brother. And before that he used to be a fruit peddler in Jamaica Plaines, before he got into the shoe business. So it was a long history there. And finally he decided he didn't want to be a cutter any more, so he started selling his scrap leather. Then he borrowed from some friends, five thousand dollars, and they opened a shoe factory in Massachusetts.

AL: That was a lot of money in those days.

HK: Oh, it was tremendous. You could run a shoe factory for five thousand, or any business for five thousand. Today, it's nothing. So, from there he went broke, twice, in Massachusetts. But again, he was able to start up. He had some relatives that he got involved with and started another factory, and they were manufacturing shoes at Haverhill, and it was around 1937 when there was a strike in Massachusetts with all the shoe factories. So my father had heard about the Lewiston-Auburn area being a center for shoe industry, so he moved up here with my mother. I wasn't born yet. They bought a house in New Auburn, and they opened up a shoe factory called Morphy Shoe (*sounds like*).

AL: How do you spell that?

HK: I wish I knew.

AL: Okay.

HK: But it is in the building today that is housed by the CMMC in Lewiston. At one time it was the Lown Shoe Company, and he rented space there, and they made women's shoes. He was the first manufacturer to make women's high heeled shoes successfully. Because up until that time, the heels always used to break. They would never last very long, and people would get hurt. So he was the one who, I don't think invented, but they put a wooden dowel inside the heel to reinforce it. And they were very successful in making women's shoes in this building.

AL: And what was your dad's name?

HK: Joseph.

AL: Joseph Koss.

HK: And my mother's name was Reba.

AL: And did his brother come with him to Maine?

HK: No, no, his brother stayed in Massachusetts, in Haverhill, and opened up a retail store. For years he used to buy shoes from my father. Well, he used to give them to him so he could sell shoes in Haverhill. Father, his brother's name was Jacob, so that's how he started. Actually it was in 1937, and he was the first Jewish manufacturer in the Lewiston-Auburn area. After, I don't know what happened, the factory closed and he brought up a nephew with him, or no, it was a, yeah, a nephew, Joe Goodman, who was a relative of his, and he was the superintendent. And they opened another factory in Auburn. It was down on Hutchins Street. You either know where Hutchins Street is or you don't, it's by the old restaurant, by the old *(unintelligible)* high school in the gully.

AL: Okay.

HK: So he started manufacturing shoes there and he made all different types of shoes, I mean there was at least ten different formulas, or different types of shoes that they made. And he had his own milling process down there for making crepe soles, which was popular at one time. He made slippers. He made what they call American welts, Goodyear welts, which is all terminology for the different types of manufacturing. Men's shoes, women's shoes, children's shoes, depending upon what was popular.

AL: Right. So the production went up and down according to what they demand was at the time?

HK: Yeah, but it was quite busy in those days. There was no foreign manufacturers. All the shoes were bought here in the United States. So it was a question of what type of shoes you were going to make and what customers you were trying to target. My father was selling mostly large chains, and then eventually discounters.

AL: So you got into the business eventually.

HK: Well yeah, my brother, and I have a brother also, Edward who lives here in Lewiston, we were brought up in the shoe business, in the factory actually, when we were – I like to tell a story, when I was thirteen years old my father took, and my brother was two years older, he took us, and we, during the summers, from school, we would clean out the warehouse. That was our job. And my mother, when we came home at

night, used to have to scrub us down because we were so filthy with all the dirt. And we had to wear a mask. We looked like we came out of a minstrel show. That's how he and I both started. And then, it was every summer from there on. We would work in the different sections of the factory, learning the manufacturing process, and also the different types of leathers that had to be used. And then when I became fifteen years old, which was a big thing because we got our license, my father said, you're going to drive me to Boston every Wednesday. Wednesday was market day, so all the manufacturers from the Lewiston-Auburn area, and actually all over the state, would migrate on this one day a week to Boston.

It was quite busy there. We had an office on Lincoln Street, and all the leather salesmen and the component salesmen that sold different parts to the shoes would gather on Lincoln Street in Boston and visit all the offices from the factories and they would show their wares, their leathers. There was a lot of purchasing done. Of course everybody got together and had lunch, and then we'd drive home at night. So this went on for quite a few years. And then we would also travel, I would travel with my father, selling. We would sell shoes. There was a great deal of clients in and around the Massachusetts area, so we would drive down with the samples. Wednesday we would be on Lincoln Street doing our buying, and then we'd take a few days and drive around through Rhode Island, different parts of Massachusetts, where clients were located, selling shoes. So that's how I got started. Then I eventually went into sales one hundred percent. I got out of the factory. My brother stayed in the factory. He was the inside person, I was the outside person. And eventually, I have a cousin, who still lives in Lewiston, his name is Jerry Feinstein.

AL: Yes.

HK: You may have heard of him.

AL: I know him.

HK: Yes, and he was our superintendent, and for many years he was very helpful training us. Then he left and opened up his own shoe factory in town, making hand sewings, called Billen Shoe. And he still, he's in his nineties, but he's still here today, thank God. So that was the quick history of our progression to what happened in the early days.

AL: Right. And so did your father eventually step back and your brother took over? You and your brother together really.

HK: Yeah, my brother, he was on the inside, I was on the outside, so in around, I'm thinking around 1960 the manufacturing was starting to dwindle. Imports were becoming very prevalent.

AL: That early?

HK: That early. The handwriting was already on the wall, that imports, footwear, was very popular. Shoes were being made in Italy, especially in Italy, cheaper. And then in Spain. And the quality was very good, and the public wanted it. Unfortunately we, as an American manufacturer, were not subsidized by the government as they were in Europe, so we couldn't compete. Our labor costs were high, insurance costs were high, and rising. So even though we were still manufacturing, we opened up an import division. We took our in-stock division, which was in the same building, in New Auburn, and we went to Italy and bought a new line of shoes, complement the ones we were manufacturing. And then what happened was, the manufacturing dwindled, and we eventually closed it in 1960 and became strictly an importer. And that was the demise. And you could see, it was written on the wall that the shoe industry was going to shrink, and was shrinking.

AL: And you could see, at that time could see shops starting to close around town.

HK: Oh yes, many shops. And today I don't know if there's more than two or three shops located, still here. There not very big, struggling. But that's today. You want to know about what happened then.

AL: Yeah, well, and so I mean you were in the business and learning about it in the fifties, in the 1950s. Can you give me a sense of what Lewiston-Auburn was like in terms of the shoe industry at that time, before things started to turn? Like a picture of, how busy was it and how many shops where there.

HK: It was very busy, very busy. And there were a lot of manufacturers. There was a lot of competition for employees, skilled employees. And when I say skilled employees I mean stitching, which was an art. And there was also a competition for hand sewers, which is a very strenuous and time consuming art. And the competition was for these people who, the employees were very much in demand. And we found that there just wasn't enough in the, younger people who were in school at that time didn't want to work in a shoe factory and their parents didn't want them to work in shoe factories. So that was another problem. In those days, they wanted to get a college education and get out of this business, because it wasn't the best job in the world, and it wasn't the best paying job in the world.

AL: So you had a lot of turnover with employees, especially - ?

HK: Well, we did, but a lot of them retired, and then after retirement the children, or the grandchildren of these people that had this art of hand sewing or stitching, or making, running the machinery in a shoe factory, was a diminishing art. So that was

another problem we ran into, in addition to the imports themselves. And as I said before, in Europe at that time, the factories, the governments of these foreign countries were subsidizing their factories. They were giving them a percentage to ship overseas, especially here. So that was another strike against us, so it was getting very difficult. And my father at that time decided to say that it was time to call it quits as far as manufacturing. But you want to know about manufacturing, so I'm getting on what's the demise of manufacturing, and I don't think you want to know that.

AL: Well, let's talk about the manufacturing then.

HK: Okay, what about it? There's so much involved in manufacturing. What specific, do you have any - ?

AL: Well, I guess I'd like to know the process.

HK: Oh, you wanted to know how many actual factories were around at that time.

AL: Yes, that.

HK: Well, depending on, there was a little fluctuation, but the bigger factories, I believe, and this is just an estimate from my memory, I think there was like twenty-nine, or twenty-eight factories in this area alone at that time. Different types of manufacturing, different genders. There were factories like Lown Shoe Company that made women's shoes. Then we made, we were very eclectic, we made different types of shoes, but mainly the gender was male for us, men's shoes we made. And then there were certain factories in town that made work boots. There was other factories that made slippers. Supreme Slipper was very big at one time, making just slippers. There was Falcon Shoe that made just children's shoes.

Now the other advent is, we were able to start buying automated machinery, which is another factor that led to the increased production with less employees. And that's putting it very bluntly. You like to say that you could do it faster, and it was more uniform by using automated machinery, stitching machines, cutting machines. So there wasn't as much, how do I say it, manual labor involved. So these skilled workers who were for years and years doing these functions, these jobs, were being phased out as we ran into automation. And today the factories that are here have almost sixty, seventy percent automation.

AL: Did it change the quality at all, do you think?

HK: Well, when you go into automation you're not able to vary your production as much as you would like to and you're not able to change what you're manufacturing quickly. You have automated machines, and it's set up to do a certain job. In order to

get that job done you have to run that machine, you know, like an injection molding machine, you have to run day and night to make it pay for itself. But you can't make another type of shoe on injection molder, you have to make injector molded shoes. And on computerized stitching, which came into being around 1960, when you put a piece of leather in a stitching mold, or in a mold, and then a computerized stitcher stitches that piece, you can't just put in another style and say, okay, I want to make this. That mold is, in order to change, is very expensive. So yeah, that kind of limited you to what you could do as far as being able to make different styles at the same time. You had to pick one very popular style and pray that you were right, and buy machinery for that style and then make it. God help you if it didn't sell.

AL: I did some history, I was working with a group on history of north and west Auburn in the last 1800s, early 1900s, there were these buildings, these shoe shops, out on the West Auburn Road, or Hotel Road. Were any of those still open, in your memory, or were those closed?

HK: Well, on Hotel Road there was one factory, and I'm, now I don't go back that far. I'm old, but I'm not that old.

AL: I know, I just thought you might know the stories.

HK: I don't know the stories in particular. I know there was one factory that, in fact it was a newer factory, and it was occupied by a factory called Bel Moc Shoe. Was it Bel Moc, or Belgrade Shoe?

AL: There's both, I don't - .

HK: Bel Moc was downtown, you're right, and Belgrade was a factory out on the Hotel Road. They were, a gentlemen by the name of Hyde Miller was the owner. In fact, he is a brother-in-law to Harold Alfons. Harold Alfons, of course, was the owner of Dexter Shoe at one time, since passed away, and so did Mr. Miller. But yeah, he made what they called machine sewn women's shoes in this factory, and did quite well, made a lot of shoes. And I knew him and I knew his son, Danny Miller. But I don't have any recollection of factories, like you just said, out there in the outskirts of West Auburn and North Auburn, did you say?

AL: Yeah.

HK: That goes back a little bit beyond my time.

AL: Too far.

HK: I'm not a history buff anyway. So that was, your question - .

AL: Yeah, so talk about the manufacturing process in terms of, to put all the pieces of the business together to make it work. If I put it that way, is that a good way to approach it, or you might know a better was to describe it.

HK: Well it depends what you, you really want to know how a shoe is made, or do you want to know -?

AL: Well, I mean if you have that knowledge.

HK: Well I do, but I mean it's, the actual machinery involved and the actual process of making a shoe depends upon the style of shoe you're making. Now, women's shoes are made basically with a cement construction. They were in those days. Which is a little bit simpler than making a Goodyear welt construction, which has a more integral parts to it. And even though they may look a little bit better on women's shoes, the actual men's shoe, which is a Goodyear welt, was a little more difficult to make and it required more machinery, as far as putting the parts together. But let us take a shoe, in order to make a shoe, first of all you have to have the correct machinery. And I won't go into every machine because I don't think I can remember every one of them, but you have to have leather, and actually there are different grades of leather.

AL: Yeah, you said one year you spent time learning about leather.

HK: I did, and all different, I used to be a leather buyer. I used to buy the leather for the factory.

AL: Is there a lot to know about it?
HK: Well there is, because depending upon the shoe you're making, you can make a shoe out of what they call side leather, which is a finished piece of leather, and it's shiny, as we know it. Or you could have a shoe made of what they call split leather, which is the underside of the leather which is after they split it, and it's like a furry, it looks to us like it's furry. Then it has to be tanned differently. And the suede is more porous than the side leather, they call it. Now, there are different grades of leather. You've got calf skin, which comes from a young cow, which is very top grade. You have side leather, which is a big skin, which could be twenty feet in circumference. Then you have goat skin, they call kips. Then you have king goat, and small goat. Also different grades of goat, and you can choose out of goat skin. We made real nice shoes out of goat.

Then the lining could be, in those days was made out of what they call sheepskin. Then you have cloth linings. So there are different types of cloth we use. The underpart, which is the inside of the shoe, and then you have an innersole. And innersole could be made out of a board, a soft board, or it could be made out of leather. And then the sole

itself could be leather, could be rubber, could be crepe. It can be a PVC material. Sometimes they make it out of urethane, but not very often because it has an odor to it, because it's made with petroleum products, so you have to be careful. And then on men's shoes you have to use a leather welting. A welting is a piece of leather that goes around the bottom of the shoe, on the sole, and it has to be stitched on. Then you have a cushion on the inside of the shoe, so when you walk you don't, it's not a hard surface you're walking on, it's a little, they used to make it out of a mixture of cork in a glue, and they heated it up and they put it in there, and it would spread out so that you'd have a cushion when you walked. So yeah, there are a lot of different materials to be used, depending on the type of shoe you're making.

And then the machinery involved is different. Once you get done with the cutting, the stitching is different. There is what they call cable stitching, which when you want to make a casual shoe, you use a heavier stitch, and if you want to make a dress shoe, you use a finer stitch in your stitching room. And then once the shoes are stitched, you have to last it. You have to form it to the particular last you're going to use. It could be women's, it could be men's, could be children's. Now the last used to be made out of wood in the old days, but then they changed to plastic, a hard plastic. I forgot to say that hand sewns are made completely different. They're what they call slip lasted, rather than formed.

AL: Okay.

HK: And that in itself is another story. So you have to tell me which story you want to hear.

AL: Tell me that one.

HK: Which one, the hand sewn factory?

AL: Yeah.

HK: Hand sewn shoes became very prevalent after a fashion, later in years, they became popular, is what I'm trying to say. And several factories were making, in the beginning it was genuine hand sewing, which is the more difficult of hand sewing, because the different forms of hand sewing is genuine hand sewing. Then they have what they call pre punched hand sewing, where the holes are already made on a machine, or a die, and then the thread just goes through the holes. The most difficult part is to line the holes up to make sure they're not all twisted. And the third one is the hand whipped shoes, which are the cheapest of the three, which we made a lot of in this town of Lewiston-Auburn. There were several factories just making hand whipped shoes.

AL: And how is that process different?

HK: This is just, the thread is just whipped around and around in the holes. There's no sewing, it's not a lock stitch. Hand sewing, it's actually brutal on the body, hand sewing, because many of the hand sewers that we used developed muscle separation in their chest, and they had to retire early. Right here in the breast plate, because they kept pulling their arms. The threads would go one way, and then they'd have to keep pulling out, like this, and it was difficult. I never liked it, because I knew many hand sewers. We made hand sewns, and it was difficult.

AL: Yeah, I thought you were going to tell me carpel tunnel. I've never heard of the breast plate separation.

HK: Yeah, this was a problem prevalent with hand sewers. But hand sewn shoes, the stitching was basically the same. You had to cut the parts, and then the uppers were stitched. And the actual shoe was stitched together without a last. It was just like a little bag. And then after the shoe was, that part was finished, we put it in a, almost like a pressure cooker. It was water with soap, and you'd put the upper in there, and then take all the air out, so the water would penetrate the shoe and soften the leather. And then after that you take the shoe out, and then because it was soft and it was pliable, you'd slip the last into the shoe and form it by hand. And then once that was done, you would put the shoe in a dryer. We had built dryers, and then you would have to dry the shoe. And when it dried, it dried in form to the last. And then you made the balance of the shoe with the sole, depending upon the sole you wanted to do, you could use a little way stitch, or cement. You could actually cement the bottom on if you wanted to, and then little way stitch it.

But that was basically the difference, and that's why hand sewns, the whole demeanor of society was crying out for casual shoes, and this was one of the pieces of clothing that they wanted, was hand sewns. So yeah, there were a lot of small hand sewing factories. This gave the opportunity, also, for a small factory to becoming into existence at that time. It was too expensive for them to go into straight lasted shoes because there was just too much machinery involved. So this was, this only required, only, this required manual labor, hand sewing. It was quite interesting, because you had to train the hand sewers. They used to have almost like a school where they have a awl, they used to have to punch the holes and then sew it.

AL: Like within your factory they were trained?

HK: Well, each factory would have their own training process. And it was young man's job in the beginning, and then actually there were women who became hand sewers, and quite good at it. And I think there's still a couple of manufacturers making hand sews. I know there's one in Bangor, Maine. I heard about them the other day.

Yeah, they're making shoes for H.H. Brown Shoe Company right now. The only reason I found that out is, my son works for H. H. Brown and they wanted him to go up and look at the factory in Bangor.

AL: Can you talk about any of the hand sewers, that stick out in your mind? I mean, it really was a talent and a skill, and you said they became hard to find. And people who trained others, who were some of those people?

HK: Well, as a matter of fact, I don't know if he's left for Florida yet, but he retired and went to Florida. There was one gentlemen who I became very friendly with named, David Rancourt. His son is Michael Rancourt, who runs a shoe factory now in Lewiston. But he was working for a hand sewing factory when I first met him, and I don't remember the year, unfortunately – or maybe fortunately, I don't know – for Commonwealth Shoe, which made shoes for Bostonian. Bostonian was a brand name at that time. And David was foreman, and also did manufacturing, and did hand sewing for Commonwealth. We were getting into the hand sewing business at that time, and in the wing of our factory in New Auburn we opened up a whole division for this style of shoe. And we needed someone to work with us, so rather than hire someone to hand sew for us, we took David, who became a good friend of mine, and encouraged him to open up his own baseness, hand sewing business, and bring some hand sewers with him. We had David work with us in the wing. We supplied him with all the materials he needed, and he opened up a shoe factory. And he became very successful. He was the lead hand sewer, then he became the owner, he was the owner. And at that time, Dexter Shoe needed some hand sewn shoes, along with our own, and he asked me if it was all right if he manufactured for them also, because we were giving him all our business. And I, of course being friendly with him, said sure. So then he started making shoes for Dexter. About that time Quoddy Moccasin became in existence, and they occupied the Lown Building in Auburn, which is now the warehouse. I think they call it the warehouse. Well, you know, the big building.

AL: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

HK: So anyway, Quoddy Moccasin made Dave an offer to buy him out and move the whole operation over there and work exclusively with them. So he did. Well, they didn't buy him out right away. He moved the operation over there, and he did very well with them, and then they, somehow something happened and they didn't want to manufacture hand sewns anymore. So he bought the business back. He made shoes for Quoddy, but he owned the business. And then they kind of closed, so he took his business and moved it into Lewiston, into the Bleachery, the old Bleachery mill on Lisbon Street, and he and his son Michael manufactured very high grade hand sewns. Because the cheaper hand sewns were not selling. So they did very well, and eventually they were bought out by Nike. Then they bought it back again, well no, I'm sorry, I jumped ahead of myself. Cole Haan Shoe Company bought him. So they made

hand sewns for Cole Haan, and then Cole Haan ended up selling to Nike because they had a manufacturing, Cole Haan was manufacturing shoes and importing shoes in Freeport. So they ended up buying the whole factory from David and his son, and then David retired, and his son went to work for another factory here in Lewiston, and I don't remember which one it is. And then this company that he was working for ended up being bought out by a Japanese firm and they made, and still make a few, or they just warehouse the shoes and sell them from here, I don't know, they import the shoes now. It's a very famous brand name of men's shoes. Something that the lawyers and business people would wear. But yes, David and I have remained friends for many years, and still we visit. We have lunch together, and we reminisce. But David would be the one that you really should talk to about the hand sews.

AL: Yes, I haven't reached him yet for a date.

HK: Well, he may have left for Florida, because he and his wife spend the winter in Florida now. But if you want, I'll arrange it for you when he comes back in, probably around May. If you're still doing interviews then.

AL: I'm sure we can do something like that.

HK: He's a nice, very fine gentleman. So, that answers your question about hand sewns?
AL: It might. Were there any others that stick out in your mind as being really, you know, maybe legendary, with their speed and production?

HK: Well, there was never any speed when you made hand sewns. It was an art, more so than making a dress shoe, because the actual part of sewing the shoe was a very difficult project, and it took time. You couldn't rush a good hand sewn. Now they do make good hand sewns overseas too now, but it started here. And it's funny, because the actual hand sewn was, never really caught fire in Europe. In Asia, after our business subsided, Asia, or China if you want to call it, or even Korea and Taiwan, were able to copy our shoes. And you know, their labor is much cheaper. So there was no surefire, quick way to make a hand sewn, unless you did a hand whipped shoe, like a slipper. Slippers were hand whipped. And there was a gentleman in Auburn by the name of Oscar Marchan, who had a small business right on Cedar Street. And they used to, what they would do was, the factory would cut the uppers and bring them over to Oscar, or in some cases he would probably have his own cutting machine, cut the leather himself, but he would do contract work. There were contract stitchers. And he made hand whipped shoes. The women would come in at night to work and make extra money and they would pick up, how many cases they wanted to do. Everything was done by the case. If it was thirty six pair to a case, eighteen pair to a case, they would come in and pick up the shoes, take them home, sew them at night, and they'd actually have their children sewing with them. And then they'd bring them back the next day.

And he'd accumulate them and bring them back to the factory in a truck. But he had a little factory on Cedar Street, right near the Pastime Club.

Of course, all the sewers at that time were located in that area, just over the New Auburn bridge. Quite a large group of shoe workers there, hand sewers, and home workers. They called them home workers. But that was an important part. There was a lot of home workers. When I say a lot, there were many sewers, but they had families and they couldn't go to the factory and work all day. They would pick up the work and take it home and sew at night at their house, and then bring it back the next day. So yeah, that was a interesting part of the industry at that time. So that's why you never had any mass production of those types of shoes, because everything else was produced in the factory and required huge machines, or stitching machines, which, well there were some actually, there were some companies that had home stitching too. They would actually provide the stitching machine to a woman, and I say a woman, or a home, and they would stitch at home. That's how a lot of the younger children became proficient, and they were able to later on work in the factory. But there weren't, unfortunately, there wasn't enough of them. So it was a dying industry.

AL: I'm going to flip the tape for just a second.

End of side A
Side B

AL: We are now on Side B. I guess this is a very broad question, are there stories or events that took place during the time that you were involved in the shoe industry that - ?

HK: You mean funny stories?

AL: They could be funny, yes. Did people, what was the atmosphere in the shoe factory? Sort of getting a picture of what it was like to work in a shoe factory.

HK: It was rowdy.

AL: Rowdy, yeah.

HK: There were no rocket scientists working there. But it was a very friendly, there were a lot of relatives that worked in the factory, related people, families worked. We had, on the other hand, there were certain times, there were strikes. We never had one because my father had a very good rapport with the employees. Somehow they never really considered him part of the echelon of shoe manufacturers in town that were against the workers. Because there was a union, although we were not unionized. But no, I don't know how to put this, but there was, the general demeanor of the workers

were very friendly. A close relationship. My father, in particular, would always talk to the employees and converse with them, and if they needed help, my father was there. Financially, he was very good to them. Now, did they make a lot of money, no, in terms of what we consider today.

AL: Did you have benefits, any kind of benefits?

HK: Oh yes, we had insurance. There were paid holidays. There were no retirement benefits. There was no 401Ks as we know it today. Those didn't exist in those days. When you retired, you retired. But no, in that sense the benefits were minimal.

AL: But you did say you had health insurance.

HK: Yes.

AL: And health insurance wasn't astronomical to cover employees?

HK: No, it was very cheap. And we did have a factory physician who would work in those days. He was a G.P. who would work and take care of anybody who was sick in the factory. We would send them over to our doctor, a doctor who consented to be the factory physician. So insurance was not as intricate as it is today either. I mean you don't have to go through all the paperwork. Like I say, there was no retirement benefits, and I don't even think Social Security was involved then. They didn't have it, what was it, 1963, something like that, when it came into existence, when people started putting money into Social Security. So a lot of the older employees, when they retired, but they were very frugal, and the families always took care of each other. The family unit was different in those days. Aunts, uncles, children all lived together in one building, and if someone was sick, someone would, and the family would take care of them. So it was completely different from what we know of today. I mean my children are scattered too. I don't even see them much anymore.

AL: And in terms of injuries on the job, anyone who owns a business is going to have employees that get injured from time to time. In the shoe factory, was that a type, injuries happened?

HK: Yeah, injuries happened, but the insurance took care of it.

AL: I guess I'm asking, were there some injuries that were pretty common for shoe workers, that you had to take care of?

HK: Well yeah, the biggest problem we had, I don't mean it to be a problem, the biggest injury category we had in the factory was lifting. And I know for myself, I've got a bad back today from lifting when I was a kid in a warehouse. I used to lift cases of

sole leather, which weighed seven hundred pounds, and we used to have to stack them up twelve high. So you became either rugged or crippled. But I have a bad back today because of that. But the most prevalent type of injury that happened was probably in the stitching room, not the stitching room, well it's part of the stitching room, when they skive the leather. They used to have to skive the edges of the leather so that it wouldn't, they would fit together smoothly. And there were these machines called skiving machines, and it was a round blade, and they would slip the leather in manually and it would go around and skive it. But if you weren't careful, you could get your finger caught in there.

The other one was in, any job that's repetitious sometimes gets very boring, and I never saw it but it happened in different factories where they had these hydraulic clicking machines. When they cut the leather, when they put the die down, and then this would come down, bang, and it would cut the leather. There were times when people got their fingers in there and it cut their fingers off. Now, I never saw it. And then there was the other, probably worse job, I wouldn't do it, was what they called a heel skiver, or heel trimmer. When you cut off excess leather after the heel was put on, there's a very sharp blade, and they just manually turn the shoe. They'd hold it and turn it, and if it slipped or caught on it, then your finger would get caught. It was very high speed. So yeah, but that was a problem that all factories faced. Of course, going back in those days it was, not only was it something you had to deal with, but it wasn't anything people would walk around with signs saying, this job is not safe, we're not going to do it. I guess they were just happy to have the job. And it paid better than the other jobs.

AL: You're sitting there with all this knowledge, and I've asked you a bunch of questions, and my question is, that I'm thinking about is, what haven't I asked you, that you think is important to talk about?

HK: Wow, that is such a broad question. I really don't know, because there are so many facets and so many, there's so many facets to making a shoe, technically. And then, like you say, there are stories that you'd like to hear. Sometimes funny stories, sometimes not so funny. There are stories that are sad, but it's, actually it's hard to remember them, it's been so many years. Things fade, and like everything else, it's what they call leveling. After awhile you're kind of twisted in your own mind. So I don't know how much more I can be of help to you at this time. But the shoe industry was, it probably was very viable in the greater part, and provided the economy to this area for a good many years, post, after the textile industry kind of leveled off, the shoe industry picked up. If you have a lot of, in those days, I use the word manual jobs, jobs that don't require machinery, and then it was very successful because of that.

There was a Canadian influence in this area, provided employees for the factories. Maybe before this they were in the mills. The migration probably was still, as far as age goes, in their middle ages, so they probably were able to utilize the employees at that

time. But after that, the ability to work in a shoe factory diminished and the desire to work in a shoe factory diminished. I always felt that they worked very hard, they were good people, and they wanted better for their children, like we all do. So therefore, they encouraged their children not to work in the shoe factory, to find better jobs. I guess, what they told me recently was, try to reinvent yourself, to do something different, to make yourself better. And this is something that I think we all strive for. But it certainly was an interesting part of history of this town because it was a lifeline. There were a lot of factories, and a lot of different kinds of people. Owners, management, not only did the factories thrive, but so did restaurants and business that supply the factory.

AL: Yeah, so when the shoe industry pretty much slowed down and closed, we lost a lot of other businesses as well.

HK: Right, but that's normal. And then other ones will pop up. It just, I guess it's like planting a garden. If tomatoes don't grow, you plant something else, and something else will grow. It was something I miss, but I don't miss. I do have good memories from it. Unfortunately, and I know what you're doing, you're trying to keep a part of history alive, and maybe there isn't that many of us still left to tell all these stories. And I probably could testify to that, because a lot of the people I know, or my relations, even my own family, have died off. I keep looking in the obituaries, because when you get to be older, you look at the obituaries first in the newspaper. We used to own the factory in New Auburn which used to be a bobbin mill, and then they made it into an assisted living, not assisted living, a retirement home, in the mill, and many of our ex employees live there. And when you look in the obituaries, you start seeing the names, worked at Koss Shoe, or worked at Billing Shoe, they were all ex shoe factory employees. So that whole generation is fading. And that's it.

AL: Thank you so much.

HK: And you're welcome so much.

End of Interview
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