Growing Up In Lowell XIII
Roland Larochelle

[In December 1985, Olga Spandagos interviewed Roland Larochelle as part of the Oral History Collection created as a joint project between the University of Massachusetts Lowell, and the Lowell National Historical Park. The following article represents a small segment of the information on Roland Larochelle as edited by Cliff Hoyt. The full text is on the website for the Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts (http://library.uml.edu/chh). It can be found under “Oral History” then “Working People of Lowell.” Information in the square brackets is additional information published in the Lowell Sun from October 10 to October 11, 2007.]

My grandparents were French Canadians. However, my father [Omer] was born in Lowell, and my mother [Emma, nee Chagnon] was born in Worcester, Massachusetts. My father was a boiler maker for the Boston and Maine Railroad. He worked out at the car shops at North Billerica. I was born in Lowell [February 18, 1921] but I grew up in South Lowell. We moved to South Lowell in 1928 where my parents bought a home. My father was a hard worker but he still had time for the family. On Sundays they would throw us in the back of the truck and take us to a lake for swimming and a picnic. We'd go on outings from the Boston and Maine Railroad, the grand outings to Pine Island Park in Manchester, New Hampshire. I attended St. Marie's School up to fourth grade where I learned French. It came in handy at Christmas time. My parents would talk to one another in French as to what they were getting us. I used to pick up some of their secrets a little bit.

Everything was going well until 1931 when my father became ill. He went to the hospital on a Friday evening. On the Monday morning he passed away, a week after he was age thirty eight. He had left my mother with eight children. A week after he was buried, my mother had her ninth baby. We were really up against it. I was the fourth oldest kid but there wasn't anyone old enough to go to work. Several months after my father died, my mother wasn't able to make any more payments on the house. So they took it away from her. My mother had to go on Relief (now called welfare.) We packed up and moved to a three-floor tenement house on Nichols Street at the intersection of Branch Street. They allowed us to occupy all three floors because of the number of people in our family. We had six boys and three girls, the girls slept on the second floor and the boys all slept on the top floor. Course there was no furnace. We had a regular wood stove in the kitchen. There was no heat upstairs at all in the two top floors, and the only heat that would go up there is by leaving the doors opened, just let the air go up.

They had a French school at Notre Dame de Lourdes near our new home, but instead they sent me to the Franklin School. It was a little school there on Branch Street, and I was in the fourth grade. The kids were mostly French and Irish. I played baseball and football so I knew lots of different kids but my friends were mostly French. We used to look forward to playing the Greeks from the North Common on Washington Park, but there was still animosity. Partly because we lived in separate neighborhoods. I think it was because us kids exchanged stories. Like watch out for the Greeks, they play dirty or talk differently. My parents never did anything to encourage friction between ethnic groups. No, no, not that I can remember, it was just us kids.

I grew up during the Depression, it was bad. I would come home from school and get a slice of bread and put it under water, moisten it a little bit and then put a little sugar on it. I'd have just one slice of bread and that would be my dinner. I remember on one occasion at the Lincoln School, the teacher kept me after school. I forget what grade I was in, probably the fifth grade. Miss Owens kept me after school and I wondered why she did that, cause I hadn't done anything bad, or anything wrong. She says, “I have something for you. I bought you a pair of rubbers. I noticed that your sneakers were all wet when you came in.”

We'd get little jobs wherever we could to help mother out. Working in stores, markets. Sometimes we wouldn't get paid for it, I mean in money, we would get paid in groceries. Say we would probably get five dollars a week in groceries, which was quite a bit, quite a bit of groceries. I remember doing errands for an Indian lady on Grand Street. On Sunday morning she would ask me to go up and get her a half pint. I was, probably about eleven, twelve, she would give me fifty cents and I would go up and get her a half pint of moonshine. I used to look forward to that every Sunday morning. She was the mother of a friend of mine that I chummed around with for quite awhile, but she would never ask him to
go after it. She would give me ten cents for going. That ten cents would allow me to go into just about any theater in the city, well not any theater, but the Crown Theater, or Rialto Theater, or one of those. I would be in the theater for four hours.

At the age of fourteen I began traveling with a carnival. This man came over to the house. He asked my mother for permission to take me with him. He was a friend of the family and had a concession of little slot machines, penny slot machines. So she said, “Sure if he wants to go.” So I went and that's where I started my working career at that time. The rest of my brothers and sisters continued going to school. I went as far as the ninth grade [at Lowell High School] that was it as far as my schooling went.

Well I didn't work with him very long, he wasn't paying me because he wasn't making any money. I left him up in Vermont and I came back to Lowell. I was in Lowell for less than half a day when I was hired by the, by a local man here, John F. Carney. He had several concessions, carnival work again, but it was mostly like a circus carnival after awhile, because we had circus acts with us. They traveled all around. Carney hired me to clean out the concessions. I was making a few dollars, and my mother was happy about that. I stayed with him off and on for quite awhile. I also had other jobs while I periodically worked for Carney.

You could take your working papers out at age fifteen. My mother found me a job in the Boott Mill. I was playing baseball at the time down in Washington Park, and she called me over and told me she had found a job for me in the mills. I went down to the mills and I walked into that noise, and the odor, it just gave me a negative feeling about going to work in this place. I went over to the boss and I said, “My name is Roland Larochelle and I was asked to come down here.”

“Oh, I'm glad to see you,” he says. “This is what I want you to do.” And he handed me a pail of oil and a brush. He wanted me to go into this machine that looked like a loom of some sort. It was going whickity whackity and making all kinds of noises and weaving this material. And so he says, “I want you to take the lint out, keep the lint off from underneath the machine. Keep it clean, nice and clean underneath there.”

So I says to myself, “No way.” You know, I don't even know exactly what I said, but I made up my mind that I wasn't going to work here. I said, “You'll have to have to show me how to do it sir.” So he got underneath there and he started to show me how to do it. I called him, and I kept calling him. The noise in there was terrible. I had to yell. I said, “Sir”, and finally I got his attention. I said, “I got to go to the toilet.”

I just went right out the door and up to the baseball field again. My mother spots me down there playing baseball and she called me over and says, “I thought I got you a job?”

So I lied to her. I said, “I'm sorry mom, I went down there but the job was already taken.”

“Oh”, she says, “you're going to have to find something else. You just can't be playing baseball all the time, you know?” She was really upset that day.

Things were rough in Lowell. Things were bad, there was no employment around. When I was seventeen I went into the Civilian Conservation Corps. I was in there for one year, from September 1938 to September 1939. These C.C.C. Camps were setup for guys from families on relief. They set me up in Vermont. They give me five dollars a month and they sent twenty five dollars home for my mother.

I then worked for what they called the N.Y.A. National Youth Administrator, but you're limited to so many hours a month, because they had to accommodate so many kids I guess. They would only allow around twenty five or thirty hours a month. They'd put you in the back of a truck and send you up to Fort Devens to work in a warehouse, or whatever, you know. I also still worked for John F. Carney at the time.

When I was nineteen and I joined the Navy [January 1, 1941], and was in there for six years. There is kind of a little story about joining the Navy. I was on Branch Street there near the fire house, and like “Crazy Guggenheim” used to say, “minding my own business” doing nothing, just hanging around. Two friends decided to go down to the recruiting office. They asked me to go down with them. I said, “I don't want to go down to no recruiting office.” And they says, “Come on, keep us company anyway.” So I went down. Well as it was, them two fellows were rejected and I was accepted. I went home and told my mother that a Chief Petty Officer from the Navy was coming to see her about getting her permission for me to go into the Navy. She really didn't like the idea. There was a war going on in Europe, and eventually we would become involved. The Chief finally talked her into signing the paper.
I was stationed aboard a battleship for a very short time, the *Arkansas*. Then I went aboard the *Sumner* as a Signalman, and we went down to South America for about eleven months. We then went through the Panama Canal along to Hawaii. I was at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese bombed. My ship was very fortunate that it came out of the attack. I happened to be up that particular morning and I saw the planes coming over. It didn't register to me that the red ball in the plane was a Japanese plane. They were strafing the dock, and they were going right by my ship that was tied up at the submarine base there in Hawaii. They came right by heading right for the battleships. I couldn't believe it even though we had been shown silhouettes of Japanese planes, and the German and we knew war was inevitable. When the Japanese did strike at Pearl Harbor we ran out of ammunition after the first ten or fifteen minutes of firing. So we had to get somebody to open up our magazine so we could resume firing. I stayed on that ship for about thirty-eight months going to some thirty-nine islands in the Pacific, on Australia, and, oh, all around the Pacific. I was finally discharged on April 1, 1945.

My future wife [Rita Hamel] came from Centralville, and her Uncle lived in the same neighborhood as I lived in, around the Notre Dame de Lourdes Parish off of Branch Street. He owned a variety store near the corner of Queen and Branch Street. She worked for him. While I was on leave from the Navy, I saw this little girl working in the variety store. And I just found reasons to go up there a little bit more than normal. I asked her if she would write to me if I wrote to her and she said that she would answer my letters. As a matter of fact, she was writing a letter to me at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack. She said she was all shook up at that particular time. We kept writing to one another. When I came home on furlough, which was only twice during the whole war, I would spend all of those thirty days with her.

When I came out of the Navy, I went back to what I liked doing best. The only thing that I knew was the circus carnival. I worked with the shows for quite awhile just traveling around and working in all sorts of different concessions or all sorts of odd jobs. John Carney used to run bingo here in the City of Lowell down at the Memorial Auditorium, and for the East End Club here in Lowell. My job was to provide cards, when the people were coming in the door. I remember they did a lot of good things, the East End Club, and I remember they made our Christmas. John F. Carney was the owner of the bingo equipment and ran it for the East End Club. He would see that we got Christmas baskets from the East End every year, every Christmas. They had a turkey in there. They had apples and oranges, and vegetables. That was a Godsend. And I remember a couple of times when I brought one home, or John Carney would bring one up to the house and give it to my mother. She would start crying.

Then I got married and my wife told me that I had better get me a real job where I would stay right in Lowell. I got a job at General Electric. I was a wire maker there, but I was being laid off so often, because of lack of material. A friend of mine suggested that I take the civil service test and get a steady job at Bedford Hospital. So anyway I took a civil service test and I passed. And I was called up there. While there, I studied nursing on my own and took the Practical Nurses Exam in Massachusetts. I passed the exam and worked at Bedford Hospital for twenty four years.