Growing Up In Lowell XV
Anita Wilcox Lelacheur

[In October 1985, Silvia Contover interviewed Anita Wilcox Lelacheur 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 Anita Wilcox Lelacheur 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/clh). It can be found under “Oral History” then “Working People of Lowell.”]

My mothers parents met in Illinois. My grandfather was a gay blade of the Irish blood. He used to go to Sunday night church services where the Irish boys would stand outside church and see all the Irish girls, including my grandmother. He kind of liked what he saw, and struck up a conversation with her, and they began to court. During this time, my grandmother, her sister, and brother all moved to Lowell. My grandfather followed her and they eventually married. My grandfather became a street car conductor and my grandmother stayed home with six children.

My mother and father met when they were quite young. My mothers parents met in Illinois. My grandfather was a gay blade of the Irish blood. He used to go to Sunday night church services where the Irish boys would stand outside church and see all the Irish girls, including my grandmother. He kind of liked what he saw, and struck up a conversation with her, and they began to court. During this time, my grandmother, her sister, and brother all moved to Lowell. My grandfather followed her and they eventually married. My grandfather became a street car conductor and my grandmother stayed home with six children.

My mother left school in her second year of high school, to take care of her semi-invalid mother. Mother did not want to get married, because she did not think it was fair to my grandmother to bring my father into the house to live, which was the way it would have to be in order for my mother to take care of my grandmother. So they put off their getting married but were engaged for seven years. My grandmother died the first week of December in 1924. During the interim between my grandmother’s death and their marriage, my mother was not allowed, according to her family ethics, to stay alone in that house when my father would be coming to visit. He had been coming to this house for probably nine to ten years while my mother was alive. But before the marriage, a cousin named Mary Costello was brought to that house to make sure there was a chaperone there at all times. My parents were married very quietly in the Rectory, had dinner in one of the local hotels and then had a three day honeymoon in Boston. I asked my mother what would happen if dad hadn’t waited? And the answer I got was one that completely shocked me. She said, “That would have been it.” In other words, for my mother, even though she loved my father dearly, her mother came first. That was the way she was brought up.

I began St. Peter’s School when I was one month short of being six years old. We had probably from thirty-five to forty students in each class. You had a class of first grade girls and you had a class of first grade boys. We were separated not coed. We were taught by nuns, completely by nuns. If you were kept after school for any reason, you had double duty. The nuns were not allowed to walk on the street alone. So not only were you kept after school but you also had to walk the nun back to the convent.

We had a pastor who was a Doctor. Instead of calling him Father Kelleher, he was Dr. Daniel Kelleher and later Monsignior Kelleher. To me he was like a Prince. He wore these little pinch-nose glasses that didn’t have ear pieces. We used to love to see him come into the school, because we knew that was a day off with ice cream. I remember, as a child, he died and all the school children were taken to the Rectory to see his body lying in state. It was the first time I’d ever seen a body with eyeglasses on. But then I realized afterwards, he wouldn’t have looked like Monsignior Kelleher without the eyeglasses.

I can remember getting out of school after a snow storm. We discovered this little hill where you could put down cardboard and use it as a sled. I found that I could do a much better job going down on my school bag. Now my school bag had cost probably a grand total of a dollar twenty-nine, but it was supposed to last me for eight years. That was the original theory. My mother wondered why it was getting scratched and looking terrible. She decided that she would walk to school to see what I was doing. And she saw! I flew home that day, my mother’s hand on my elbow. I should say, I got ushered, as she said, ushered home. I was punished and I did not ride my school bag any more.

I grew up in what they called the South End (Upper Central Street, Hosford Square.) My mother tells me that when she first moved there it was considered quite a nice neighborhood. There was a beautiful orphanage called the O’Leary Home. The neighborhood also had working class people. You had policemen, a baker, and men that worked in the Bunting, which was a mill down on Crosby Street. There were many rooming houses in that area. There were three that I knew of in that general neighborhood: Mrs. Hornbrook’s, then Donahue’s, and Mrs. McGlinchy had one. Now there may have been others on other streets, but those are the ones I knew.

We got out of school for lunch at quarter past eleven, eleven-thirty, somewhere in there and we’d come back at quarter past one. You had to walk careful at that time of day. When it came to meal time, mill workers had an arrangement where they probably paid twenty-five cents a day for a hot meal that included soup and hot bread. When that Mill whistle blew, people from the mills went in all directions to these rooming houses. Some left their aprons on while others would take the aprons off, but they all would tear down the streets, up Back Central Street, coming up Whipple Street or coming up Crosby Street, and then
Down Central Street to Hosford Square. They only had that hour and the stampede worked in reverse when the whistle blew again at one o'clock, and they had to be back at work. You beter not be in their way! It was a fun thing to see these people come running.

My father was brought up by a Catholic mother and a non-Catholic father. The name Wilcox is definitely English. But my grandfather converted to Catholicism in his later years, because he wanted to be buried with my grandmother as a Catholic in blessed ground. My parents were always very lenient. During high school I was always allowed to go to any dance run by any organization, whether it was Protestant, Jewish or whatever. I did find a little bit of prejudice when it came to who I would date. In other words, they would prefer I date an Irish boy and my mother never got over the fact that I married a boy with a French name. To her dying day, I’m sure, that even though she was unable to speak because of a stroke, that in her mind if someone said to her, your daughter’s name is LeLacheur, she would have said, “Oh yes, but his mother’s name was Mahoney.” So that made it okay.

While I was in high school, my parents received food stamps and they had cotton stamps. I can remember this poor lady that probably never got over the shock of my mother taking me in to Cherry and Webbs. In those days it was something to be able to go to Cherry and Webbs and buy something. My mother took me in and picked out a raincoat that was cotton-poplin and it had a cotton flannel lining. She was very careful and very specific to get one that would be cotton. The coat cost nine dollars and mother handed the saleslady four dollars and fifty-cents and the cotton stamps. Well, the woman almost went into cardiac arrest. In those days salesladies were very prim and proper. They wore the black dresses with white collars and black little bows and their orthopaedic shoes. All of a sudden she’s presented with this mess of stamps and she didn’t know what to do. I stood there embarrassed to death with my hand up over my eyes. Even so, I was thrilled the next day when I wore the coat to school and everybody thought it was nifty. It was one of these foreign intrigue type raincoats.

I turned sixteen in October of 1941 and started to work. Four of us girls went looking for a job at Woolworth, which was a mistake. I went back the next day by myself and I got hired to work for Christmas and at Easter. Next summer I worked at four o’clock on Saturday afternoon because all the stores were open until nine. And downtown Lowell was like a carnival on Saturday. Everybody went downtown.

Then when I was a senior in high school I switched over to Kresges Five and Ten, and I was chosen to be permanent part-time, meaning I went in Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, from one-thirty until five-thirty. I could go that early because the Bartlett School had burnt down, and the Bartlett School pupils had to go to Lowell High School. My day started earlier and I got out earlier and could go to work at one thirty. I worked in hardware, which meant nuts, bolts, and cutting window shades. I was the least senior worker, the runt of the litter, and got all the dirty jobs to do. I got seven dollars and fifty cents for working a week. Now kids start new jobs they get that for an hour.

While still a senior in high school, I became interested in getting a job at Electric Light because they had an active girl’s club with dances, theater parties, beach parties, and all sorts of things. My Uncle was friendly with one of the officials at Electric Light, and he arranged for me to have an interview. One of my two personality faults is that I am completely honest and the other is, my brain has always been an inch and a half outside my mouth. So that I say things and then wish I could get those words back. In this particular case, my honesty got me a job. When I went to the interview, I did all the things I was told to do by the teacher who had trained us in stenography. I wore my white gloves, my hat and my nylons. We were warned not wear saddle shoes, bobby socks, and pleated skirts, all of which I always wore. So I did my whole bit, my pearls and the whole thing. I filled out this application and then it came to the personal interview. I was ushered into the inner office, with sweaty palms and my knees knocking. I think if the man had not smiled, I would have burst into tears and dashed out. He began asking me questions. How well did I type? I told him I was no world beater. Did I like shorthand? I said not particularly. And I thought filing was just about my speed particularly. And I thought filing was just about my speed and I was interested in clerking. I got a job and later I was told that the reason I got the job was because I was honest. Interestingly, three years later it became my job to give out the applications and bring people in for their personal interview.

I met my future husband, Bill, when we both worked at Mass Electric. He was working outside when I came out from my coffee break. He saw me but I didn't see him. Then one time I was in charge of a party that Electric Light gave for all the Veterans and Bill had been in the Coast Guard for four and a half years. Part of my job for the Veterans party was paying for all the food. Just as I was about to go pay, this very nice looking, tall blonde, young man came over and asked me to dance. I said, “I’m very sorry but I have an appointment to pay the bill.” After paying the bill, I came back and he was still standing there waiting. So what was I to do but to dance with him. When the music stopped this man I didn't know from Adam said “I'm going to marry you.” At the time he was 24 and I was 21. I married him a year later.