D: This is January 15, 1985. My name is Diane Novelli and I’m here at the Lowell Park Service interviewing Rene Desjardins. Is that the right pronunciation?

R: Right.

D: Well, I worked on that. And his experiences working in the mills. First of all I'd like to know a little bit about yourself. Where were you born?

R: In Lowell.

D: Yes.

R: Yah, in little Canada

D: Uh huh. And your parents?

R: My parents were born… Well my mother was born in Canada. My dad too, but they're American citizens.

D: Uh huh. Did you have brothers and sisters?

R: Yes. I've got two brothers and two sisters besides me.

D: Um, how about your schooling? How far did you get in school?

R: High School.
D: Oh, all the way through?

R: Yah. Not all the way, third grade ah, third year, Junior.

D: Umhm. That's pretty good for someone…

R: At that time, you know.

D: Yah, at that time, isn't it?

R: Umhm.

D: What kind of work did your father do?

R: Well my father was working for Chalifoux Company. I don't think you would know.

D: No.

R: Chalifoux Company was on the corner of Central and Merrimack, a big clothing store. (D: Uh huh) He was working in the grocery department. And when Chalifoux went out of business, he didn't go out of business exactly, he didn't want to take care of the grocery department any more and he sold it to my dad. And my dad was one of the first ones in Lowell to be a self-service market (D: Umhm) on Prescott Street. But at that time in 1929-30 there was no place to park on Prescott Street. So he couldn't make it. (D: Oh) So he got himself a job at the mill, the Lawrence Hoisery, as a watchman. He was working twelve hours a day, and he had to go around the mill with a lantern. And he used to do eighty-four pins a day, every two hours.

D: What does that mean?

R: Meaning he would start from the main office. I was young at that time. I used to go around with him. He would go in the first building and punch a clock, number one.

D: Oh.

R: Then you would go to the next building. Then go up the stairs in the mill in the back. Go up six stories high, walk all the way up. They wouldn't allow them to use the elevator. So he used to go up every two hours, and down, and up, and down.

D: Uh huh.

R: He used to do eighty-four pins every two hours, because it used to take him an hour and forty-five minutes to do it, for eighteen dollars a week.

D: Yes
R: Eighty-four hours seven days a week.

D: Was that considered good money in those days?

R: Well in 1931.

D: Yes.

R: Then he worked himself up to reciever and he worked...when the mill went out they sold out to Textron. And there's another company there, and I don't remember the name. He was transferred to maintenance. And thats how he used to start the wheels in the morning with a Mr. Vivier. Vivier might have been over here for about twenty-five, thirty years. See, there used to be a turbine over there, but that blew up, and they never used it after that.

D: By this time, were you still going around with your father or did you have a job of your own?

R: No. I was only about nine years old, ten years old then see.

D: So you couldn't go into that?

R: No. So when I grew older I was going to school. When I left school I got myself a job right away for the Nashua Blanket Company.

D: How did you get that job? Did you know somebody there?

R: I knew some...my friend, a fellow I was going out with, you know, as a buddy.

D: Uh huh

R: And I was sixteen years old then.

D: And what kind of job was that?

R: Well this was, actually was work in the cloth room where they were making the blankets, the Nashua Blanket Company. And I started over there and I used, they used to, the women, they used to stitch blankets. Now there were some single blankets and some double. So they used to put them over there and I used to pick up all the different colors and bring them into a, like a little warehouse. And from over there they gave me some orders from J.C. Penny, Sears Roebuck, all different companies, orders. And I used to make up the orders. Then I was all done with that I'd give it to my buddy. He would count them, and take the weight of the blankets and ship them out after that. I worked there about two years.

D: Yah. Do you remember what you made then roughly?
R: Thirteen dollars a week. (Both laugh)

D: Did you still live at home?

R: Huh?

D: Did you still live at home?

R: Oh yes. I was still living at home, oh yes, yes!

D: Yah.

R: Then I started going out. Well, then I worked on the railroad for a little while. The railroad was tough, very tough. So I got myself another job, and I got married when I was nineteen years old.

D: Uh huh.

R: From over there, my dad was still at the mill. So he told me one day, he says, “I was laid-off from my job.” He says to me, “Rene, you want to work setting up machinery for this company coming in?” I said, “Okay, where? Where's the job?” “In number six mill, all the way up.” I went up there, worked for Mr. Powers, and I set up machinery for them.

D: Now what does that, what does that involve?

R: It involves spinning, winding, that's all, on nylon…on rayon. I worked there oh, four years.

D: What do you mean by setting up the machinery?

R: Putting the machine together.

D: Oh!

R: That's what they call setting up the machines. See, all the parts. All brand-new machines. They were all parts, different parts. And we used to look on the blue-print to put those together.

D: Was there anyone to teach you how to do this? Or you did it (--)?

R: No, there was, well, there was the big boss over there telling us what to do, you know what I mean? And then I learned by myself.

D: There was enough work at that to keep you there for four years?
R: Oh yes, but uh, I…from over there, then I went to maintenance work for the Lawrence. They needed some help down below so I went over there. And from over there I didn't like the set-up. Some guys were three guys, or two guys, and I was the only one and I was doing all the work. I'll tell you the truth of it. I was doing all the work and I got fed-up one day. I says, uh, “That’s it.” So I went over to my dad. I told my dad about it. He said, “Oh no, you're not going to…” “Yes, yes, I’m all done.” So I left. So he told me, he said, “I could, I could have made a boss out of you if I wanted to, if you stayed.”

D: Is that what he was?

R: Yah. Synthetic Yarns, that's what it is.

D: Okay.

R: Synthetic Yarns. So I took off. I took up welding on Bridge Street. From over there I got myself a job before the war, at Bethlehem Steel. (D: Umhm) From Bethlehem Steel I worked there for three years, yah, three years, then I got drafted and I went in the Army.

D: Where is there a Bethlehem Steel plant?

R: In Quincy Shipyard.

D: Oh, okay.

R: And from over there I went in the Army. I came out of the Army. Then I got myself a job at the Boston Navy Shipyard.

D: Doing what?

R: Welding

D: Uh huh.

R: Then I stayed there for awhile, No, I went up to Watertown, Watertown Arsenal. From the Watertown Arsenal, I got transferred to Boston on account of that Watertown was closing. So I went to Boston Shipyard. From Shipyard to Portsmouth on account of they were closing too. So they transferred me to Portsmouth. I stayed there nine years in Portsmouth and I went out on retirement four years ago. I had twenty-six years of service. So that's where I got my last job.

D: Yes. You've had a lot of different job experiences.

R: Yes.
D: Yes. I think what I'd like to talk about is, even though there weren't many years involved there, is your years in Lowell at the mills.

R: No, no, it was mostly outside work for me.

D: Yes.

R: But that Lowell job there, it was a watchman’s job.

D: Uh huh.

R: So, my dad says to me, he says, “Do you want this job, Saturday and Sunday?” I said, “Okay, that would be nice. Extra money.” So I worked there. I went over to see the boss, a fellow by the name of Mr. Landry. I talked to him. Hector says to me, he says, “Okay Rene, you can start next week.” So the week after I started. I didn't see him for nine years, my boss, I didn't see him for nine years. He says, “It's all your own, you know what to do.” So I used to go around. There was only twenty-two pins then. So he knew that I knew the place before, see?

D: Uh huh.

R: Then I got my brother-in-law with me, my brother, we used to alternate Saturday and Sunday. So that's how we happened to know.

D: Yes, and that was the night shift, huh?

R: Uh, sometimes night-shift, day-shift, on Saturday and Sunday. Sometimes during the week, you know, if somebody was sick I used to replace them at midnight.

D: Yes. When did the mills, when were the mills working then? From what…

R: The mills were working three shifts.

D: Three shifts?

R: The Synthetic Yarn was working three shifts. Textron was working two shifts. The Parachute was working one shift.

D: And this was before the war?

R: Yes.

D: Donna told me that you had some experience starting up the turbines?

R: It's not the turbine. I never did start the turbine, (D: Okay) the generator, that wheel there.
D: All right. Yes.

R: See we, they used to start that wheel at six o'clock in the morning. My dad used to start it a six o'clock in the morning with the operator. Well at six o'clock they would go, about five minutes of. He'd go in there and he would open the [governor], what they called a [governor]. The wheel was about that wide. We used to open it up where you could see the numbers, one, two, three and open it up very slowly. Now the man down...the operator couldn't see him, what he was doing.

D: Uh huh.

R: So they were playing with a bell. One bell would be, put the water on. Two bells, put a little more water. Now that man, the operator, he would have a light, a bulb, against the switchboard, and every time my dad used to put more water the faster that wheel would go. Now if he was putting too much water, the operator would tell him, two bells you're putting too much water. Then he would see that belt, or that wheel starting to flap up, up and down. That means he's going too fast there. There’s a dang...it’s very dangerous when she starts flapping like that, she might go off. So they'd slow down the water. And every time he'd put the little water, more and more, that light would blink, blink, blink, blink. When the operator used to watch it. So when he was down to number four, I think, was it four, four and a half he was still, the first thing you know, that light would go off. And the moment that light would go off the operator would put a big switch in there, and that's it. Then my dad used to lock the [governor] so nobody would play with it. It had enough water. So the worst time, they were making nine hundred kilowatts, well that was the first shift, they used to work two shifts. So sometimes she couldn't make enough water, you would have to buy from L.E.L. So sometimes eight o'clock, and nine o'clock at night they used to shut off some machinery in the mill. Now she's making too much electricity. They would switch over to L.E.L. and give all the surplus to L.E.L., which was all profit for them.

D: Umhm

R: But the mill, when they were buying from L.E.L. they had to pay for their electricity, see.

D: That's really interesting.

R: When I was on maintenance, the worst time to get water, we had a hard time to get the water in October on account of the leaves coming down from the canal. And when the leaves used to come down from the canal, the suction of that water going right through the canal would bring all the leaves against the rack, a wooden rack, you know. Some of them were steel too. So they used to call us, and we used to go in there and open up the floor, which was about that wide, about four feet wide and about fifteen feet, sixteen feet long. Take the board off and go in there with a steel rack, about that, and
take all the leaves out, to leave the water go in. Then, when they seen they had enough water going in, they could tell, see? Then in December it was the ice.

D: Yes.

R: It was the ice.

D: Yah, I was going to ask you about that.

R: They'd have to break that ice up.

D: Right there by the rack?

R: Oh yes. Where the water's going right through, see? The rack is about that wide, you know, like this, all the way down.

D: Did the canal freeze all the way down or like just the top?

R: Just the top.

D: Did the water flow underneath?

R: Yes. Sometimes the canal was very cold in winter.

D: I can imagine.

R: Freeze about two inches, three inches. At that time it still was running too, see.

D: This was when you were doing the maintenance work? That you [unclear] outside.

R: When I was working for the maintenance, yah.

D: Did you do a lot of things outside?

R: Oh yah. I'd do all kinds of cleaning up in summertime, the sand, in wintertime the snow.

D: Uh huh

R: The flood.

D: Which, what flood is this?

R: 1936.

D: I don't think I've heard about that.
R: Oh.

D: I heard about the hurricane, but we'll talk about that later.

R: Oh the hurricane, well that was during the flood too.

D: We'll talk about that later. Yah.

R: The flood, well, the flood we had a lot of experience on account...I was working that afternoon and we could...the Locks and Canals was giving us a bulletin every hour about how the water would go high, you know, how far it would go up. So uh, the boss came over to us. He says, "Well you'll have to work overtime tonight." I said, "Okay." So we were about a crew, nine people. So I says, "All right, what are we going to do?" "Well you got to watch the water and the meters, how she's going to go. We're going to block some stuff around there," and just, we had a lot of work. So a bulletin came in at nine o'clock that night. Lock and Canal issue a warning that the water would go approximately two feet in the boiler room. The boiler room was over here, and the generator was right here on the same level. So the boss said, "All right, if that's going to be the case we're going to build a dam around the generator. So we went out and got come boards and we put tar in there, sand, and everything. Then we got another one two hours after that they would go over the board. So at four o'clock in the morning, we were still working then, at four o'clock or five o'clock in the morning, the water was eighteen, I think it's eighteen, eighteen feet in the boiler, the boiler-room. That's almost, about that much over the generator.

D: Yes.

R: We still got a mark in the boiler room up there.

D: Where it went?

R: And the date and everything. Then the water start going in to the mill, in the warehouse. So in the warehouse they had a lot of bales of cotton.

D: Umhm

R: So we used to sit, go in there, come down the elevator and get one bale of cotton; sit on it and row with a small thing that we had made; bring it outside and put it on a truck further up. So the water was about where Riggs and Lombard is today. It was about two feet away from Riggs and Lombard.

D: Umhm

R: We used to take all the cotton bales and they were floating all over the yard, see?
D: Yah. Was uh… I thought that the Canals and Locks were supposed to prevent, they were supposed to be able to control the level of water? Apparently they couldn't. Is it just that they got overtaken by the river?

R: Probably (shakes head yes).

D: Yes.

R: Yes.

D: What time of year was that? Do you remember roughly? Spring most likely.

R: Spring, yes.

D: Yah, it must have been

R: See though, it’s not the canal that's doing that. It's the water from the river. She goes in through the holes, and she overflows.

D: Yes.

R: She builds up in the canal. In the canals the boards coming down, but as the river comes higher and higher, first thing you know, the water's coming up in the canals, right?

D: Right, yes.

R: They can't control it. The only time they can control it when you control if from Pawtucket Street. They used to control there, how much water they want, and this and that.

D: It was beyond control?

R: Yah, and during the Flood. Oh yah, definitely.

D: How long did it take the water to recede back to normal?

R: Uh, well I did get, I didn't go home for three days. The water was, on the Aiken Street Bridge, I was one of the last ones to go by there on account they called me up telling me to take my wife to the hospital. She was going to have a baby girl. [D: Laughs] And the water was about that much from the top of the bridge on Aiken Street. So that's (--)  

D: Is that the worst, then is that the worst flood you can remember in Lowell?

R: Well I would say it took three days for the water to come down, and that's when the trouble started.
D: How so?

R: You had to clean everything in there, the pit, for that wheel to run. We had to take the water out of that pit, clean all the stuff. The generator had to be dried out.

D: Um.

R: There was a lot of work to be done, see?

D: Yes. Yes. I was thinking when you were telling me about your father, starting up the turbine?

R: Yah.

D: I had a couple of questions on that. First of all, how many turbines in the morning did he have to start up?

R: Uh, there's two generators over there. They're not turbines, they’re generators, see?

D: Oh okay.

R: The turbines, they’re not using it on account that blew up before my time.

D: Before…okay.

R: There's got two up there. They got two wheels. One of them is still up there, a small one is up there. They had two. Sometime they used to use the both of them. When they had a lot of machinery working and they didn't want to buy from L.E.L., they'd start the other one up. (D: I see. I see) Now the canals on that last one ends right there. Ends right there.

D: Yah.

R: So in summertime we had to clean that canal up. Now you cannot imagine what we found in there.

D: Like what? Must have been pretty nasty.

R: Babies, just everything.

D: Yah.

R: Then the Hub Hoisery (D: Yah) was right there. The girls were working…I don't know if I should come out with that? If they were working and they didn't make good work, they'd take the stockings [D: laughs] and put it right through. You know, you
wouldn't believe it, sometimes we used to get a hundred dozen stockings. So they would get paid for it, you know? [Laughs]

D: That's a good one.

R: Oh the owners, they knew that.

D: Yah. Yah. Did you have much contact inside the mills with the other workers? Did you get inside and be able to talk and socialize with some of the people that were working inside?

R: What do you mean?

D: Well like the weavers and the spinners.

R: No. No. The only people that I, there was no weaving to be done over there down the Lawrence.

D: Okay.

R: No.

D: What kind of…

R: What they used to do in there, there used to be stockings. That's what they used to call the Lawrence Hoisery.

D: All right

R: They were making stockings, but after that they went out of stockings. They started making tee shirts. There was no weaving, all knitting.

D: All right. See I don't know.

R: Which they are still doing today.

D: Okay, well sewing perhaps? Was there some sewing?

R: Uh, sewing? Yes. Yes.

D: Okay.

R: Sewing was on the number one floor.

D: Okay. Well then I still, my question is still the same. Were you able to socialize, and to be able to talk and meet with the people that were inside doing that kind of work?
R: Yes. People that I knew that I used to talk to, you know, people.

D: Were you expected to be able to fix the machinery inside too when something broke down?

R: At that time I wouldn't fix any machines for the Lawrence Hoisery. I used to set them up.

D: Right.

R: But I mean setting them up, if there was any new machinery coming in, coming in from outside, our job was to bring up that machine up to the sixth floor. Now how do you think you're going to bring up that big machine (D: Piece by piece) which is twenty-five or thirty feet long? So what we used to do, we opened the floor up. The floor could, would be opened about fourteen or fifteen feet wide in the length.

D: Uh huh

R: And we used to open up all the floors all the way up to the sixth floor, and put a crane down and bring it up, and bring that machine up. And we used to watch it so she wouldn't go on this side. So she would hit the thing.

D: Yah.

R: So one day, one Sunday, we used to do that on Sunday. One Sunday morning something happened. The guy on top there from the winch, he was holding the rope and that thing gave way. And he’s trying to stop it. Now he can not stop that machinery. Burn all his hand right through. But we were lucky, that was on the fifth floor, we were lucky that she twist over, and when she twist over she came (D: Oh)…settled right on the edge of the floor, or she would have gone right through the canal.

D: Yah, with that, that weight. Nobody got hurt?

R: He's the only one that got hurt.

D: Well with his hands, yah.

R: Yah.

D: Did you feel that any of your work was dangerous? Uh, any amount of danger involved? You had to be careful.

R: Well you always got to be careful, you know. At the mill now, but on my other job they were very…
D: The welding and all that stuff. Um, was your dad’s job dangerous starting up that…?
No? (R: No) The belts and things?

R: No. There was nothing dangerous about… anybody could…

D: The water?

R: I’d show it to you in about ten minutes, how to do it. That's all, very easy. It's just the idea. This guy over there was controlling with that button, see? If they didn't have the button, they wouldn't know what to do. My dad could open up all the thing and then he would have ran away, see?

D: Yah. Um, somebody else told me about a hurricane he remembered being in. I think he told me 1938? (R: ’36) No?

R: ‘38, yah.

D: Yah, two different years. Do you remember that?

R: Yes, I do. I was working there.

D: Did that do any damage to the mill?

R: No. No. The only damage that did in the flood, we were working on the second, third floor of the mill on Aiken Street. They were looking through the, outside the window, looking at homes coming down, you know. And I said, I yelled at Joe, “Joe, there goes your house.” He had told us before that his house was too high on the hill. You wouldn’t…the water wouldn't touch it.

D: [Unclear].

R: His house was coming down, yes.

D: Oh my goodness.

R: Right in front of him. He couldn't do nothing.

D: It’s terrible, yah. It really is.

R: Yah.

D: What did you do during the war? Were you on a …?

R: During the war?

D: Yah.
R: I went in the service.

D: Which branch?

R: The Army. Then when I came out... I stayed a year and a half. When I came out I got myself a job welding.

D: Uh huh. In the shipyard?

R: Yah. After it was [unclear] shipyard after that.

D: Do you think that was dangerous? You consider that? (Probably shakes head positively) Why? Were you up, heights?

R: Height, yes, but not so much as when I worked down to Portsmouth. Bethlehem Steel, I work on the Massachusetts, The Lexington, [unclear], all those ships and airplane carriers. Then I got transferred to Portsmouth there. Boston, I worked on them, too. But I went to Portsmouth, worked on submarines. Then I got transferred to maintenance. That was dangerous on account of you had to go up...One day I'm on this crane. This crane's about a hundred feet or more. It was very, very high. One of the biggest cranes. And I had a job to do with the electrician, to put a light on the side, on the side. And the crane is right there, and it's ninety feet from there to over there, (D: Um) 90 feet.

R: So they went over and got a bucket. So they took the bucket and put it on the side. I got in there with all my equipment and with the electrician. And he said, “We're going to go up about 40 or 50 feet high now.” Now there's 90 feet over there and 50, about 50 feet there. So I says, “All right.” So I goes in there. So I told my boss, “Extra money for this now, don't forget.”

D: Laughs.

R: Oh no! It's not high enough. Extra money. (E: Laughs) So first thing you know, I got in and starting tacking something where the light would go. After it was all done they'll look at it and say all right, “You can weld it up.” So I start welding it up and all of a sudden the hydraulic boom came right down about two feet.

D: Um

R: All of a sudden! Well my... I got so scared my shield went up in the air, down the dock and everything.

D: Yah.

R: You know when you don't see nothing and that you're that high, and that thing comes right down all of a sudden!
D: You were saying?

R: And then a couple of days after I went on that crane again, all the way to the edge. All the way to the fifth. Over there I'm a diabetic, and I got a little shaky. I came down. I didn't do no work. I told the boss, “no more for me.” “Why?” “I'm shaky.” And I was shaking like this from my sugar. (D: Oh) My sugar was a little high then, see. And then they gave me a job with the maintenance. In maintenance, well, you have to weld pipe underneath the dry-dock, do all kinds of work, outside work. And in my work, too, I went to Scotland and I went to Spain.

D: Um.

R: I worked for them.

D: You worked for an American Company?

R: No, the Government.

D: Oh?

R: The Government. In Scotland we worked five miles out in the water on the dry-dock. The Scottish Government don't allow nuclear subs to be near their dock, just won't allow that. We used to work… Well we had a job for a month up there. We did it in three weeks. We came back early.

D: Umhm.

R: See, over there, why we went over there, we were two-hundred and fifty, there's three submarines that goes out every day. Now when those three subs goes out, you don't see them for three, four days. They take off.

D: Umhm

R: Where they go, I know where they go. They come back. Now if one sub, there’s something wrong with the sub, that's a team, three. Three's a team. So there'd be only two, right?

D: Um

R: It would cost them more money for the Government to bring the sub to Portsmouth than for us to go over there.
D: Oh, to bring you all over there?

R: That's right.

D: Yah.

R: And then, in case of emergency there's always two, three, you know, the best workers. And Spain, you can work right off the dock.

D: Uh huh. Oh?

R: So there's a lot of guys that are going up there.

D: That's pretty interesting.

R: Oh yah. Yah.

D: Did you like that work better than when you were working in Lowell?

R: The money was better (laughs).

D: Yah, I bet.

R: Yes, but you get used to it.

D: Yah. You came back to Lowell here when you retired?

R: Oh yah. I always lived in Lowell. I used to travel a hundred miles a day. I always did.

D: Oh, I see.

R: At 90 miles to Ports… uh, Bethlehem Steel. That's in the old time now, the old back road. There was no highways, this and that, 90 miles. It used to take us two and a half hours, two hours anyway. But in Portsmouth, it used to take an hour, an hour and ten minutes, all depends how fast you were going.

D: That was um… I liked the stories like, you know, when you told me about the girls throwing their, their cast-offs over the...

R: Oh yah, their stockings. Yah.

D: Can you think of any more stories like that?

R: No.
D: I bet you will. You'll think of a hundred when you go home today.

R: No.

D: No. Those are the kinds of things we like to hear about.

R: Yah. See, so they wouldn't lose no money.

D: Yah.

R: See, bad work.

D: Do you remember Union activities or strikes? Talks about strikes, here in Lowell?

R: Yes, in 1932, N.R.A. started. It never came to us.

D: Do you remember any walkouts here?

R: I walked out myself. That was at, at Nashua Blanket.

D: What were you hoping to get? Better wages I suppose.

R: We were looking for shorter hours.

D: Okay. What were you working then?

R: I didn't... I walked out, but I had no activity. I keep away from that. I'll go with what the other people do. If they want it, they want it, that's it. But they were fighting mostly for... They were working fifty-two hours. They wanted forty hours. You worked down in Nashua for thirteen dollars a week. I used to work forty eight, sometimes fifty-two hours. We worked Saturdays, four hours on Saturday.

D: Yah.

R: And nine hours on...during the week.

D: Did those strikes, did they work? Did they bring about any changes?

R: It did some places. Some sweat-shops.

D: Yah.

R: It did a little bit help. Then it started growing after that, you know. But there was a little fighting between the girls, you know. Some girls wanted it, some other girls didn't want it. They were satisfied with what they were making.
D: They used to try and cross the picket lines I suppose?

R: Yah. That's where there was all the trouble.

D: Yah. Did you feel like sometimes there were outside people stirring things up, or is it hard to say?

R: To tell you the truth I couldn't tell you.

D: Okay.

R: See, there was a lot of...there was some people from New Bedford come here and, you know. We didn't know then at that time. Everybody was new on unions from what I could see. But they never bother us in the Lawrence. We were satisfied. We were making, at that time as maintenance I was making twenty-four dollars a week. So that was good at that time. I was satisfied. But mostly the sweat-shops. That's where the people were going after.

D: That was bad, yah.

R: The shoe shops especially. The mill. Some mills, you know. See that's the only mill I worked, in the Lawrence.

D: The Lawrence Hoisery.

R: I never worked some other place. That's why I couldn't tell you about the weaving.

D: Okay.

R: Or something like that.

D: Sure. Sure.

R: I went out for a job as a weaver, but when I heard the noise in there (D: Oh!) I said, “I'm not coming in here.”

D: I know, isn't it (--) 

R: That was at the Suffolk, Suffolk Manufacturing. You know, where you people got your place there.

D: Yup.

R: On Suffolk Street.
D: I know. I've heard like just one loom going. I can imagine what a whole room of them must have sounded like, yes. Some people loved working in those weaving rooms.

R: That's right. Now you imagine today, those people, how deaf they are.

D: Yah.

R: There's some (--) 

D: Yah.

R: You know what I mean?

D: Yah, I always [unclear].

R: At that time nobody knew anything about that.

D: I know.

R: But now, today they know whoever...they have some of them living. They have some people living today yet, but they must be a little deaf, at least seventy-five percent.

D: Yah. That, and all the fibers that they had to breath in too.

R: Fiber, yes.

D: Some of the places.

R: Yah. And then, that was a, the weavers was a dangerous job, too in a way. Now you never knew about that bobbin, how she would come out. She would hit you right on the head, if she should get stuck or something, you know. And some women, I used to talk in there. Some women had about forty-eight loom, forty-eight of them. And bobbin boy, you had about eighty. Now if he was finished over here he would have to start over again. All over, over, all the time.

D: Yah.

R: Then worked ten hours in that plick-plack (loom-noise) pick-plack. Then go home, come back the next morning. [Unclear sentence]

D: Yah. You didn't want, huh? Did your wife work?

R: My wife?

D: Yah.
R: (Probably shakes head yes)

D: What kind of work did she do?

R: She worked at the Hoisery.

D: Really? Is that where you met her? Or (~)

R: I met her over there, yes.

D: How about your sisters?

R: My sister worked for Raytheon. My other sister never work, but she did work. She worked [words unclear]. Her husband didn't want her to work. See?

D: Yah.

R: My brothers worked down to Bedford, and my other brother used to work for Textron. Different company for machinists, sewing machine machinist. And he's still doing that today, but he's retired. But his friend sells them, the Jewish people sometime he used to work for. “Roland, I need you.” “Okay.” Roland would go down and he'd say, “Well, what do you want?” My brother say, “I don't want nothing. I don't want nothing.” About two months ago I told him I needed a pair of shoes, sneakers, you know, those walking shoes? I says, “Roland, I need a pair of walking shoes. Running shoes.” “Okay, come with me.” We went up there to a place up in Hudson. He goes in the place. “Hi Sam, I'm looking for a pair of shoes.” “Go ahead Roland, take what you want.” So I didn't like some of them. So he went in where they make them. “Gee I like that pair right there.” Tells the girl, “Make him that pair of running shoes.” (D: Oh) The company. They showed me how to do it. You know, I was looking at them. The easiest thing in the world. The easiest thing in the world to make them. And they're selling them for forty-eight, fifty dollars. They cost them four dollars and fifty-cents to make them.

D: Yah, everybody's got to have a pair.

R: I don't know if that's going to come out on that tape now. [Laughs].

D: No. [Unclear].

R: You can scratch some of it off.

D: I can't uh, I can't think of any more questions.

R: That's all I could tell you.
D: That's probably because I don't... Do you think I'm, am I missing anything about your, your (--) 

R: No. That's mostly what I …

D: Your Lowell days. I'm trying to picture what you did. Uh, you had such a variety of things to do.

R: Well, I can tell you… Oh I …

D: I guess it would depend on the season. What time of the year it was when you were in maintenance?

R: Oh no, it's the same story. In summertime it was doing mostly cleaning around the yard. Pick up papers and this and that. You know, for awhile there was about eight thousand people working in there, or more.

D: Lawrence Hoisery? Before the war?

R: Before the war. Yah. Oh yah.

D: Were you, were you aware of like how, any changes in the machine? Of course you put together the new machinery. That must have told you something about …

R: New machine and there was some old machine they brought in. Some old machine.

D: Was this when it changed from going into the synthetic fibers mostly?

R: No. That's when they started. The synthetic fiber compared to the synthetic yarn they used to call it.

D: A lot of new machinery came in?

R: Some new machine, yah. Approximately fifty new machines that came in, the rest was all junk from Pennsylvannia.

D: What do you mean by junk?

R: Leftovers.

D: Oh, okay.

R: Get a part over there, you get a part there, make a machine out of it.

D: What was different about the new synthetic machinery? Was it more automated?
R: Yah, it was. Brand new. It’s a brand new machine running good and everything, see. And that was mostly spinning, new machine. The winding was old machines, old machines, but they wouldn't do the work. They'd just take the fibre from the bobbin and go in through this small wheel and fill that up. That's all it was. It used to go back and forth, back and forth. Take that and ship it out upstairs, and they would rewind it up there on a different z-twists, or o-twists, (D: Umhm) right or left. There was all kinds, see. You had to be very careful. If you put it on the wrong twist that would be all junk. You can't bring it back.

D: Yah. Yah. Well…

R: And they used to make parachutes, too, up there,

D: At Lawrence Hoisery? (R: Nods head) Yah, before the war I guess.

R: During the war.

D: During the war. It was like great when they saw a need for it.

R: Yah, that's it. I…over there I worked as a machinist with my brother. Fixed up sewing machines. Just spare time, you know. And I made a lot of girls cry.

D: Why?

R: Well, you know, my brother's an expert on them. His boss is an expert. The other guy was always good. Me, I was learning.

D: Oh.

R: And I learned fast. They told me to have my brother show me. He says, “Here you are Rene, that's your machine. Take it apart, clean it up, put it back together.” So I did. So at first you know, they gave uh, ten girls, see.

D: Um hm

R: And I know one girl went up to the boss three times. I told the floorlady, “Hey, I can't satisfy her. She's doing something wrong.”

D: Ummhm

R: She [unclear] all year. “You're only a learner.” See, they didn't want me.

D: Ummhm.
R: Well the trouble was that she was pulling, as she was stitching she was pulling on the parachute too hard. By pulling on the parachute, the needle, instead of going in there, like that, the hook would touch the needle and the needle would break all the time.

D: Yah, I know what you're saying.

R: And the floor-lady told her. But she was a new girl herself. She said, “I don't want Rene to fix my machine.”

D: Yah.

R: Then they give me a job to set up the speed on the machine. Now I was the head man for that.

D: Uhhuh.

R: Oh, they don't like me I tell you. “Her machine is faster than mine!” Well I used to tell them, “Your machine is timed about twenty revolutions more than her.” Here's the difference there. This woman works four hours straight. She don't go and smoke. She don't go to the ladies room. You're in the ladies room every fifteen, twenty minutes smoking, and you come back and you don't know….she takes a shorter way, the way she's pulling her cloth, at the end of the day it's going to count, right? Maybe two or three dollars more on the piecework.

D: Yah.

R: Then I caught another woman, too. She used to come in early in the morning. And that's one thing, never show a woman how to fix the machine in front of her on account of this one was a little wise. She had a little screwdriver about that big, put it right on top and just turned it about a quarter turn. Well the government specified they want eight stitch to an inch.

D: Umhm, umhm, right.

R: Right? Well the inspector, the girl just go by. She start in the morning, well, she's not doing eight, she's doing six to seven. And every time the girls used to come, “Hey Rene, the machine is off again.” So I would go over there and fix it. She used to make about four dollars a day more than the rest of the girls. So we caught her. We told her, don't do it any more. They were making good money at that time, see?

D: Yah.

R: Then if they'd break down he wouldn’t get paid. He didn’t get paid for it.

D: I know.
R: That was good money.

D: Yah

R: Very seldom you see that.

D: Most of the women that I've talked to told me that they thought they knew, they had more of a feeling for their machines than sometimes the mechanic.

R: Yah.

D: You know, working with them so much. But some were allowed to fix their machines and some weren't, you know.

R: Yes. And my brother ("")

D: Depending on the company I think.

R: Everybody wanted my brother.

D: Yah.

R: On account he knew what he was doing.

D: Yah. Yah.

R: Because you work with a bunch of women.

D: That's the thing.

R: There's jealousy.

D: Uhhuh, yes.

R: There is jealousy.

D: Yes.

R: She makes more than me, and this and that. So then if I go and talk to you too much, "Oh, Rene's going out with her." That's the way they are. I'm telling you. You know that yourself. [Laughs] You knew that.

D: Did you like that job? Or you really didn't like it too much?

R: No.
D: You didn't care for it?

R: No. No, to tell you the truth. You know, my brother had been in that business all the time. I was new to it. No, I could see it. There’s too much jealousy.

D: Yes?

R: They'd think that (--)

D: What does your wife do now?

R: My wife is a nurses aide at the River Valley Home.

D: Oh she's not at Lawrence Hoisery anymore?

R: No, no! She never worked there. She worked for the Hub, Hub Hoisery.

D: Oh, okay.

R: See. She was a packer over there. She made good money, her. She was on piece-work. She was so fast that half her piece-work was put on the side and they never paid for it.

D: Um.

R: On account she was afraid that if she turned all that piecework in it would reduce on the other girls too.

D: Yah.

R: So she put about approximately the same about the other girls.

D: Yes, she'd just slow down.

R: Yes.

D: She started over there when she was young too. She worked there about ten years I think. Right after we got married she quit. She quit and she started twenty-five years after.

D: Oh, and she had some children in-between, huh?

R: Yah, the three. Two girls and a boy. But they were lonesome, you know what I mean? Sometimes I was gone out for a month and a half, two months. She was all by herself. So she says, “I might as well get myself a little job.”
D: Oh.

R: She got herself that job. Now she doesn't want to quit and she's seventy-one.

D: Oh that's pretty good.

R: I don't know how she can do it. She can do it.

D: Yah, she likes to work, huh?

R: Oh yah, she never stops to tell you the truth, not on account that she’s my wife. I tell her, “Why don't you put that down?” “No.” You know after awhile you love your job so much you don't want to leave. (D: Yes) And she's working with some young people, we'll say, seventy-six years old to ninety-eight. Those are young.

D: At a nursing home?

R: Not a…its' a retirement home. You know that place on Fletcher Street? What you call the Old Ladies Home?

D: I can't say that I do.

R: Well you're not from Lowell?

D: No.

R: When you go on Fletcher Street, you know, O'Donnell, (D: Yah) the Funeral Home?

D: Yes. Okay.

R: One, two…the fourth house on the right, going up Fletcher. That big big…

D: Yes.

R: Now, that place now, there's a history in back of that.

D: Go ahead, tell me about it.

R: Well I couldn't tell you everything, but its for the mill girl.

D: Oh?

R: When that started…that's what my wife told me now. And I think there's a woman over there that could tell you. That woman is ninety-eight years old. She could talk to you, and she could show you pictures when they built up that dam on Pawtucket Street.
D: Oh

R: She's ninety-eight years old. My wife was telling me that started on Dodge Street by
the French people, girls. That was a home for them to go. But they wouldn't take, if you
were Protestant they wouldn't take you. Just Catholic. You know, that was at that time.
That's the old time The Irish and Protestants, there was [unclear]. So uh, they finally
went out of business, bankrupt. And this bunch of women took over and they started the
same thing as like the French girls. From the girl was protestant, the girl was this and
that. And they got so big they had to move out. So they bought that home which they
got fifty-two rooms in there. They can take only twenty-five women. Some of them,
they used to work in the mill.

D: Uh huh.

R: They're over there, but there's some rich women in there too.

D: Umhm

R: And they're on contract. They pay so much a month, you know, like on contract.
They give the Social Security or something like that, some of them. I think there's four of
them left.

D: Yah.

R: So there's history in back of that building.

D: I never took a close look at it. I'll have to, because I think I know where it is. I know
where you're talking about.

R: [Unclear] it's right beside the church.

D: Yah.

R: Yes. And the only thing that, I worked there four hours a day. I came out from
retirement. I went up there looking for a job, and I got the job. And my wife says to me
the next morning, “What are you doing here?” I said, “I'm working here.” Oh she
couldn't believe it. (D: Laughs) I worked there about six months. My legs were giving
out. But you got to see those women. Never goes out. Never, never go out. They're just
waiting and waiting.

D: Yah

R: Too bad, you know what I mean?

D: Yah. You see that in nursing homes a lot, too.
R: That's right, yah. There’s only...there was only one man working there. I was the only one. And there was a supervisor that took over, a man too. There's history. This woman, Mrs…. well she used to own, you know D.L. Page downtown?

D: No.

R: Brighams?

D: No. I think I do but I don’t want to say.

R: The restaurant, Brigham’s? (D: Coughs) that used to be D.L. Page.

D: Okay.

R: And D.L. Page sold that to them. And boy, I'm telling you, she's got two rooms. She's paying for two rooms now, that woman. And one room, I'm pretty sure is locked up. And she told me, sometime I used to talk to her, she says, “Rene, if anybody that wants to know anything about Lowell, your granddaughter or something for history, tell her to come down and see me.” I seen some pictures with the Irish people from Ireland, coming over and work on that dam, the Pawtucket Dam. That's history for you people.

D: And she's got this? She's got pictures like that? Rene, I'm going to stop the tape.

R: Okay.

Interview ends

Jw