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Interview with Bertha Libby by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Libby, Bertha

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

December 6, 2002

Place

Lewiston, Maine

ID Number

MOH 379

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Biographical Note

Bertha Yvonne (LeClair) Libby was born March 3, 1922 to Joseph and Florida LeClair, the seventh of twelve children. She attended St. Peter's Catholic School in Lewiston until the seventh grade. She was a waitress for many years at Steckino's Restaurant in downtown Lewiston and has vivid memories of serving Democratic politicians.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Lewiston, Maine in the 1920s and 1930s; Catholic organizations; the Great Depression in Lewiston; Lewiston Catholic schools; political change in Lewiston; Louis Jalbert; Little Canada in the 1940s; Lewiston's downtown; Steckino's restaurant; Ed Muskie's influence on the Lewiston area; childhood skating in Lewiston and Auburn; and the Nichols Tea Room.

Indexed Names

Brann, Louis

Curtis, Kenneth M., 1931-

Ducharme, Joanne
Jalbert, Louis
Leamon, Nicci
LeClair, Florida
LeClair, Joseph
Libby, Bertha
Malenfant, Ernest
Muskie, Edmund S., 1914-1996
Nichols, George P., Jr.
Nichols, Peter G.
Vangeli, Emilio

Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Bertha Libby, at her home in Lewiston, Maine on December the 6th, the year 2002, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Bertha, would you start by giving me your full name, including your maiden name?

Bertha Libby: Bertha Y. LeClair, Bertha Yvonne LeClair.

AL: And where and when were you born?

BL: I was born March 3rd, 1922.

AL: And where?

BL: Here in Lewiston.

AL: So you've grown up in this area?

BL: I always, most of my life was in Lewiston.

AL: And did your parents live here as well?

BL: Yes, they did.

AL: What were their names?

BL: Joseph and Florida LeClair.

AL: And did they immigrate to Maine, or were they born here?

BL: They were born here.

AL: And what did they do for occupations?

BL: My mother never worked, but my dad for fifty some years worked for the Lewiston Sanitary Market, until he retired.

AL: And what did that, what did they sell?

BL: It was a grocery store. He was a meat cutter at that grocery store. Before that in his spare time in the evening he used to, there used to be a Mr. Berube that owned a store and he was crippled, he couldn't cut his own meat. So my dad would go help him, in the evening he'd go cut all the meat for this Mr. Berube.

AL: And were your parents active in the community?

BL: My dad belonged to the Jacques Cartier, and my mother was a real home woman, she never, the only thing she liked to do was play cards.

AL: Did she belong to women's groups that got together and played?

BL: No, no, she was too busy raising twelve kids.

AL: Twelve?

BL: Yes.

AL: Oh, my. Where do you fall in to those twelve kids, in the middle?

BL: Well, she had thirteen. One died, so I'm right in the middle, I'm number seven.

AL: And your father, you said he belonged to the group, but I didn't catch what the group was called.

BL: Jacques Cartier's, Jacques Cartier.

AL: And what was that?

BL: Well, that was a Catholic union of some kind, wasn't it, something like that. And they had a meeting once a month, and then when it came, I can't remember what they call it, but they used to ride around with a little lamb in the car, yeah, when it came (*unintelligible word*) Jean Baptiste, they had a parade and he was in that. But otherwise he was a very busy man, working all the time. He was a home man.

AL: Did he ever talk about politics at home?

BL: No, that's something they didn't talk about. Not that I remember.

AL: What do you recall of the Depression years in Lewiston?

BL: Well, I know it was kind of rough, I know that things were kind of slow. We had what we needed, but there were times I guess that we had to put some cardboard in our shoes. But they always kept us well dressed and nice and clean, and going to school. And, I had very good parents.

AL: What schools did you go to in Lewiston?

BL: I went to St. Peter's. And I went as far as the seventh grade, and then my mother took very sick and the oldest ones were working to help in the house. So they took me out of school for a while and then I never had the chance to go back, I was in the seventh grade. So I stayed home and I was helping my mom while, it was right after the last baby was born, I stayed home and helped her.

AL: And at that time when you were in school, were they teaching both in French and English?

BL: French and English, yes.

AL: How did that work in the schools?

BL: Well, to tell you the truth, in the Catholic school they were pushing more on you trying to become a nun, or the boys becoming priests. It was more religion than, you had the basic arithmetic, but I mean, they didn't, in the days when I went; they didn't have all that algebra and all whatever they have now. So it was, we just learned the basic stuff.

AL: Was the church something that your family was involved in growing up?

BL: My dad went to Mass every morning, yeah. He went to Mass every morning; I used to go with him in the morning. He was not involved in any of the goings on or whatever, these special things in church, but he was a church going man. He was a very good man.

AL: And what was the Lewiston community like then, as you look at it today how has it changed, and what was it like?

BL: Well, right now the politicians seem to be wanting to do more things than they used to in those days. In those days it seems that they'd elect somebody and then you didn't hardly hear anything about him until the next elections. They didn't involve themselves too much in what was going on. That I remember. Maybe some others will remember something else, but.

AL: Are there any political figures from that time that you do remember as being, sticking out in your mind.

BL: Oh, there's one that stuck in my mind all right, is Malenfant, Mayor Malenfant. He was a funny character.

AL: In what way?

BL: Well, he used to work for the *Messenger*, and he lived somewhere going up Pine Street, but that man never, never walked on the sidewalk, he always walked right in the middle of the street, going up Pine Street. I always remember seeing him at lunch time going up Pine Street, right in the middle of the street. And he got, he was a little more involved in doing things, because he was working for the *Messenger*, so he had more going on than some of the others.

AL: Do you remember, later on, Louis Jalbert?

BL: Yes, I remember Louis Jalbert because when we lived, we lived on Bartlett Street for a while, and they lived in the same building. The Jalberts lived in the same building we did.

AL: And what was Louis Jalbert like?

BL: He was a pretty nice person, that I remember.

AL: Did you follow him -?

BL: Of course, he was older than I, you know, quite a bit older than I was so I really didn't get to know him that well, but I knew he lived in our building.

AL: Was he very visible in the community, do you remember him talking about -?

BL: I don't remember.

AL: No. And did you live in Little Canada?

BL: I lived on River Street just for a short while after I was married. But that was a very short while, because we lived in Turner and we had a fire at the house. And the only place I could find a rent that they would take children is down on River Street. But as soon as I could find another place, I just got away from there.

AL: So that area didn't appeal to you?

BL: No, no. No, there was, it was too close to the Auburn bridge, and there was too much traffic and I was always afraid when the kids would go out, and they didn't have much of a place to play, because it was right on a corner and they didn't have much of a place to play so I was anxious to get away from there.

AL: Going back to the Lewiston community then and now, what sort of things, you talked about the mayors being a little more productive. Are there other things in terms of -?

BL: The mayors are more productive now than they were then.

AL: Yeah, yeah. And what other changes have you seen in Lewiston over the years? In terms

of religion, and socially?

BL: Well, it's changed so much that I really can't, it's not the same at all as it used to be. For one thing now, elderly people are afraid to go out in the evening, that's how much things have changed. I remember a time when they had all the stores, Lisbon Street, that was, I mean you used to be able to go take a walk up and down, up one side and look in the stores and go down the other side. But now nobody wants to go, all the elderly people even hate to get out of this building here at night, that's how much it's changed.

AL: Well the downtown Lewiston used to be a very thriving shopping center.

BL: Yes.

AL: People came from all over to shop here, didn't they?

BL: Yes, but now even the in the daylight they hate to go, the elderly people hate to go walk in the city park, that's how much things have changed. That's what they say around here.

AL: Now, I understand you have a couple experiences when you were waitressing at Steckino's?

BL: Yes.

AL: Can you tell me those stories that relate to Ed Muskie?

BL: Oh, one of them, Ed Muskie, that I remember the most, he used to come quite often, they used to have a lot of meetings there. And there was one time there was a great, there was a big meeting, there must have been over fifty, fifty to sixty men in that. And as short as I am, and he was a tall, tall man, and I'm trying, I've got my tray on my shoulder and I'm trying to put the salads and the juices on the table, and I had to keep touching people on the shoulder so they'd move. And he saw me, so he picked up my tray and he was holding the tray so I could put the stuff on the table. He was a very likeable person, very outgoing, very likeable. And I used to like to work those meetings. He used to, whenever he was in Lewiston that's the place that they used to meet.

AL: Where was it?

BL: Steckino's was on Park Street, but they tore it, was it Park or Middle? I think it was Middle Street. And it's torn down now. When Mr. Vangeli died, the sons took over and they tried to modernize it and it wasn't the same any more because they tried to make it more for a, a sports club, sports place. And Steckino's was a place where doctors and lawyers and all the big businessmen, that's where they used to go all the time, that was the most, the best restaurant that there was around.

And there was one governor that had come, I can't remember his name, I was trying to remember. And there was a party, all Democratic women party, and I was serving the bar. And

of course you always put a little dish with, for tips, you put a few nickels or dimes in there and that was a hint for tips. And none of the women, it was a women Democratic party, and none of them left any tips. So, I'm trying to remember the name of the governor that came in, he was having a meeting.

AL: What year was it?

BL: Oh, my gosh. I remember he was a short man, Brann? Not Brann.

AL: Ken Curtis?

BL: Curtis.

AL: Ken Curtis.

BL: He was short?

AL: Yup.

BL: He came in and he says, "Am I too late for a drink?" I said, "No sir." He says, "I hope you're a Democrat." I says, "I was up 'til tonight, but," I said, "the Democrats don't tip so I'm going to turn Republican." So he put a five dollar bill in there. I used to have fun. They were all a bunch of good sports there.

And one time I was passing, there was another of those big meetings and I was passing the salads again, and the juices, and one of them kept looking at me and looking at me. So after a while I went by and I said, "Have I got a button missing on my shirt or something?" He says, "Yes," he says, "I just found it in my salad." So, I worked there for about seven years, until I took sick and I had to quit. But it was a nice place to work.

AL: Was there also another story about somebody who mistook -?

BL: Oh, there were these four little old ladies that used to come in once a month when they got their checks. And it was so cute, you could tell that they were not rich, and they'd come in and they'd ask for four cups, four empty cups and these little cream containers with water in it. They didn't want milk, they wanted water. So I'd bring that over and they'd put a little bit of water in their coffee cup and they'd pass a little tiny flask under the table so they'd each have their own little drink.

And there was this, oh, his name was Bill, he had an insurance company in Auburn and he used to come all the time. And you would have sworn he was Muskie, you would have sworn it was him. So they asked me, he was sitting on the other side, and they said, "Is that Mr. Muskie?" I said, "Yes, it is," just to please them. "Do you think he'd give us his autograph?" I said, "I imagine." So they said, "Would you go ask him for us?" So I went over and I says, "Bill," I says, "they think you're Governor Muskie," I says, "and they'd like to have your autograph." So he took some napkins and he wrote the name of Governor Muskie on them and I gave, oh, these

women thought, they were so happy because I did that.

And then there was another time that I remember about Muskie. He had come in this building, that was ten, nine, eight years ago probably, and there was this very elderly person living upstairs. And she had come down because she wanted to see him so bad. So he had come for, that was during some election year, he had come and made a speech for, to help another one, I can't remember who the other one was. And so when he was walking out, this little old Mrs. Levesque says, "I came down to see my boyfriend and he didn't even notice me." And she was ninety-nine, going on a hundred.

So I went up to him and I told him, I said, "There's a lady here, she's almost a hundred years old. She came down to see you and," I said, "she would really love to say hello to you." He says, "Well, where is she?" So he turned around and he went over and he gave her a hug. And he had this other gentleman stand on one side and he stood on one side, and there was a man to take pictures over here so they took a picture, those instant cameras, so they took pictures of her with Muskie. Oh, you would thought that you had given her a million dollars. I remember little things like that, but.

AL: Are there other recollections that you have of Senator Muskie, either personal interactions with him, or observing him on the national scene in later years?

BL: I used to like to listen to him whenever he was on TV. I used to think he was very good, he was very interesting, very good. But I was never much in politics. I was too busy raising kids.

AL: And how many did you have?

BL: I had eight children.

AL: Wow.

BL: Joanne is my oldest. And Nicci is the fourth, right? Yes. There's Joanne [Ducharme], and Mike, and Barney, and then Monique, yes.

AL: And you were going to talk about your skating?

BL: When I was a teenager, there was five or six of us girls who would hang around together, and there was this bunch of guys from Auburn, they'd come to the skating rink. In those days we had open air skating rinks. And we never, it was never a date with this one or that one, but we used to go ice skating every night of the week. Sometimes it was so cold that the ice would break right under your skates, but we used to have so much fun we forgot how cold it was.

And then in the summer time there used to be a nice big roller skating rink under the grandstand at the Fairgrounds. And that's where we'd spend all our evenings; we'd be on roller skates. That was our sport, roller skating all the time. And in the summer time, lots of times, right now I wouldn't go across the street to go to the store, but in those days we used to walk. In the summer

time we used to walk way up to Sabattus to go swimming. When you're a bunch together, it doesn't seem so far to walk.

But I really had a good time with those girls, we chummed around together for a long time. And then the war came, and we lost track of every, most all the guys that were hanging around. But we did have some good times. And it was cheap in those days, you go skating all evening for ten cents. And they had those shacks that you could go in and warm up, they had those pot bellied stoves in there that you could go in and warm up. And they had, they were selling chocolate bars or potato chips. And the skating was always from seven to ten, so that was most of my pastime. On ice skates and on roller skates.

AL: And the Nichols Tea Room, you worked there?

BL: Nichols Tea Room, I worked there for quite a while. I was working; I was only about fourteen years old when I had gone to a shoe shop with a friend of mine. She was working there, and I lied about my age and I got a job over there. And then one of my sisters was working at Kresge's, at the lunch counter. And she wanted to go somewheres real bad on a Saturday, so she asked me to go down and see if, to tell the boss that she couldn't make it down, that she couldn't work that day. He says, "On Saturday, what am I going to do?" I says, "Well, selling hot dogs and hamburgers, I think I can do it." He says, "Yeah, but you're so short." I said, "Well just put a box, a wooden box, and I'll stand on it." And they had those big root beer kegs in those days, right on the end of the counter. So he says, "Okay, I'll try you." So after that, I'm the one that got the job. He never called my sister back.

And one day I was walking down, walking home, and I saw that, I had heard that there was a restaurant that was going to be opening, opening soon, so I went in. And there was Peter and, Nichols was there, Peter and George Nichols, they were two brothers, and they were the ones that were opening it up. So I asked them if they were taking names for help. And they asked me what I was doing and I told them I was working the lunch bar at Kresge's, so they took my name. And I was the first waitress they ever hired there. And less than a year later they let me open it up in the morning and close it up at night. Oh, they were such nice people to work for. They were terrific people to work for. So I worked as a waitress all my life, almost all my life.

I worked in the mill for a little time, but then it was during a rush and then when they didn't need the spares they let them go. And I worked, Raytheon? Yeah, Raytheon, and I had to count those little transistors. And you had to pass a thousand an hour so, of course, you had to go real fast with that, just little tiny things with two little wires. And so it got after that I'd be home, and I had a wringer washing machine, so I'd be doing my laundry and I'd go, one, two, three, I'd be washing the floor, one, two, three, I'd be washing dishes, it was the same thing. I was counting all the time. But then that rush was over so they let a lot of us go, too. They closed a short while after that, I guess.

But waitress work was my favorite thing because, especially at Steckino's, we were making very, very good money over there. That's how I could help to keep the kids in school.

AL: Great. Thank you very much.

BL: Oh, you're welcome.

End of Interview