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Ducharme, Joanne (Charest) oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

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Interview with Joanne (Charest) Ducharme by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Ducharme, Joanne (Charest)

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

December 6, 2002

Place

Lewiston, Maine

ID Number

MOH 380

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Biographical Note

Joanne (Charest) Ducharme was born in Lewiston, Maine on May 16, 1942. She grew up in the Lewiston Franco-American community, and her primary education was in parochial schools. As a teenager she worked at shops in downtown Lewiston before working at the Raytheon plant for a time. She lived in Bangor where her husband served in the military, and then returned to the Lewiston area. She is a member of Sur Vivance Francais, a Franco-American cultural group for women.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Lewiston in the 1950s; Lewiston's parish culture; downtown Lewiston in the early 1960s; decline of downtown Lewiston; service in small shops; Franco interaction in the community; Franco reception in World War II; family gatherings; textile mills; shoe shops in Lewiston; social clubs; discouragement of the French culture in the 1960s; and French language today.

Indexed Names

Charest, Telesphore "Babe"
Ducharme, Joanne (Charest)
Jalbert, Louis
Malenfant, Ernest

Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Joanne Ducharme at her mother's house in Lewiston, Maine on December the 6th, the year 2002, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could you start just by giving me your full name, including your maiden name, and spelling it?

Joanne Ducharme: Okay, my name is Joanne Carmen Charest Ducharme. Carmen is my godmother's name, which was my mother's habit of giving all the children the godparent's name, as their middle name. Charest was my maiden name, and Ducharme is my married name.

AL: And where and when were you born?

JD: I was born here in Lewiston, May 16, 1942.

AL: And I forgot to ask you to spell Ducharme.

JD: I'm sorry, D-U-C-H-A-R-M-E.

AL: And did you, you grew up in Lewiston as well?

JD: I did, I lived in Lewiston all my life until I got married.

AL: And you moved away for a while?

JD: When I got married, my husband was in the service and he was stationed in Bangor. So we lived in Bangor for a couple of years, and then we moved back to Lewiston. And then after a few years in Lewiston we bought a house out in Poland, which is where we've lived all our married life now.

AL: What was Lewiston like when you were growing up?

JD: Lewiston was a very busy place, I remember. But it was very, for the Franco-Americans, it was very much a neighborhood, and the neighborhoods were all revolving around parishes. You identified yourself by what parish you lived in. Especially when you went to school, you went to the school in your parish, in the grade schools, and then when you went to high school you, you stayed with the friends that were more or less from the parish where you grew up. So it was, it really revolved around your neighborhood, your social life, and family.

AL: And the church.

JD: The family, yeah, the church and the family. And the social activities were the usual ones for, anybody that knows the fifties, they remember the sock hops and the skating, as my mother said. Ice skating was still very popular because each parish had its own rink that the families maintained, we had booster clubs, and so the winter time was devoted to skating. And, let's see, what else?

Summer times a lot of kids, even though they were very young, had summer jobs. I can remember a few years my brother and I would take a bus and go out to some of the farms in Greene and Sabattus to pick vegetables. That was a thing you could do once you turned ten or twelve I think it was, until you were sixteen. Then you could start working in the stores downtown, which is what some of us, especially the girls would get office jobs or clerking jobs.

And so my first real jobs were at ladies clothing stores on Lisbon Street, which was a very busy commercial area at the time. Lots of little shops, little jewelry stores. And I started working at a place called the Princess Shop, which was across the street from the Frances Store. That's where I worked through my high school years, and went from there to, after graduation I went to a job at Raytheon, in the office. And I met my husband while I was working there, and then moved to Bangor when we got married.

But Lisbon Street was supported, really, a lot by the Franco-Americans, because everybody went to the same store to buy their clothes. Like, Benoit's was the place for you to get your good Sunday clothes for the boys. Even though women, people that lived in Little Canada, which, you know, people thought as, for a long time now it's been more or less, was a slum area of Lewiston. Back then, even though it was big apartment buildings and a lot of the apartments had twelve or fourteen rents in them, and most of them were coldwater flats, no running hot water.

But the people were very proud people and they worked very hard in the mills and the shoe shops. So they always had a nice car, which was put in storage for the winter so it wouldn't rust, and the women would go to Murphy's to buy fur coats. So on Sunday church, on Sunday Mass, you would never think that they were poor people. It was always very well dressed, took out their car for their Sunday drive, and children had to be well dressed for church. And the rest of the week, you know, they were in the mills and in the shoe shops, working very hard. But it was a very busy, busy area.

AL: What do you think changed downtown Lewiston?

JD: Well, I think actually, when the malls started. People started shopping at the bigger stores, the K Mart and places where they could get things a little less expensive, and then people started having two cars, so it was fun to just get in the car and go shopping. So they didn't walk to the downtown area any more. So little by little the shops closed up and didn't have the support.

The other thing is that, a lot of people I don't think realize is, most of those stores downtown, like, I bought my mother, I don't know if you noticed, she has a mother's ring with all eight stones, I bought that 'on time' when I was working, in high school. And I was paying like two dollars a week until I paid for it. And that's what a lot of the stores down there did. Like when I worked at the Frances store, my job in the credit department was, people would come in and buy

a coat for eighty dollars or so, which was quite a bit of money. They'd come in every Saturday morning to pay their two dollars or their five dollars. And so those little stores knew their customers and knew these people would come in with their five dollars a week if it was necessary, and so they were able to buy quality stuff "on time". And actually the little grocery stores worked like that, too. Some of them still have "putting it on the slip" they called it. Buy their groceries during the week, and come paycheck time they went and paid their bills.

So I think that's, with people having easy access to credit cards, they can go to the big stores and just zip their credit card, it's not a one-on-one thing any more. Which is, I think, what happened to the downtown area for shopping. And it was also a social thing, because you kind of got caught up to each other's lives, you know, or the storekeepers of course would ask how you're doing, how are your parents doing or whatever. So that part of it is missing, which I think has happened in most cities now because the pace is just too fast, people don't have the time for it. And if somebody, heaven forbid, if you're in a check-out line somewhere and somebody starts, the clerk starts chatting with you, the line behind you gets very impatient, you can hear all the big sighs. So I think today's pace has kind of discouraged that one-on-one contact that people should have when they're parting with their money.

AL: Do you remember some of the politics that were happening in the city?

JD: Actually, I'm kind of ashamed to say I don't, because my family, as my mother said, they were not very politically involved. And I can't even really remember my relatives talking about going to vote or supporting someone. The Franco-Americans in my generation were taught to "don't make waves." Just do your job, and try to be invisible. That way, you know, you won't get into trouble. Because they were always afraid that if somebody in the family caused trouble, then it affected the whole family because everybody was so close. And so I really can't say that we were ever politically literate. I remember my father having a part-time job, when we lived in Little Canada, with, in a store that sold some of the first TVs that came to Lewiston, and that man that owned the store was an alderman, and that's about the extent of it.

But my family, when my father came back from the war he had, he more or less, how can I put this to be kind, he more or less did not want us to display our Franco-American culture. He wanted us to learn to speak very good English. He did not want us to speak French outside the home, because during the war he had been very ridiculed and put down for his being "Frenchy." And when he came back home he just did not want that for his kids.

My father was a very hard workingman, a very stern man, and raising eight children they didn't have much of a social life either, except for the family. Saturday nights, uncles, aunts, cousins whatever would get together, they'd play cards. The parents always played cards. That was, a big thing was playing cards. As a matter of fact, three of my aunts on my father's side for twenty years now get together every Wednesday night and play cards. It's just a family tradition; it's a way of keeping in touch.

AL: My family, too, so.

JD: I'm not a card player; there isn't one game that I can say I know how to play. But it was,

basically the social life really revolved around the family. The summers spent going to the beach, you always were going with an aunt and cousins, so most of my socializing was done with relatives. And almost every Sunday that I can remember my father would go to see his mother on Sunday morning, just stop by, whether he brought us with him or not he was there until we'd call him and say dinner's ready. So it was really just family, and as I said I can't remember either side of the family getting involved in politics in any way. They just were recovering from the war and starting to own their own homes, and getting involved in their parish activities.

AL: Now you said that one of your grandfathers was a butcher, a meat cutter, and the other was, worked in the Continental Mill?

JD: Yes, he was a floor supervisor, they used to call him one of the bosses. Which, you know, was something for a mill worker to aspire to, but that was kind of the ceiling. You didn't get into management because the management people were mostly people from out of state, you know, that the companies brought in.

AL: That was your father's father?

JD: That's right.

AL: And what was his name?

JD: Telesphore Charest, T-E-L-E-S-P-H-O-R-E, but they called him "Babe" because he was the youngest of his brothers. I can't remember if he had five brothers? There's a building down on the corner of, well actually where Hope Haven is, that building has the name Charest on it. And that was my grandfather's brothers that built that building, or owned that building when they came from Canada. My grandfather, from what I understand, my grandfather was five years old when he came, and he was never naturalized. So it was a big joke in the family that my grandmother never let him go back to Canada, because she was afraid they would keep him. So he never went back to visit his relatives. I think he had a brother, when he passed away I think he had one brother left in Detroit, but I haven't followed up on that side of the family too much yet. But he was raised in Lewiston and worked in the mills all his life. And both my grandmothers were stay-at-home grandmothers, raising kids.

AL: What other things do you remember about Lewiston that I haven't really asked yet?

JD: Oh, of course, just size wise for building. When I was in grade school we lived just a little ways, actually we changed school every time we had another child. I went to first grade at, kindergarten at St. Mary's, first grade at St. Peter's, second and third grade at Holy Family, fourth, fifth and sixth grade back at St. Mary's when we lived in Little Canada. And then we moved out to what were the outskirts of town at the time, which was Bates College area. We moved out there and I went to Jordan Junior High, which had been a high school before, now it's an apartment house I think, and then I went to Lewiston High.

I went to parochial school through the sixth grade, so a lot that I can remember is a lot of open

spaces just beyond the college. Russell Street was, Sabattus Street was very, very on the outskirts of town. And then when Holy Family parish up there was building their church, when we lived up there we were going to church in the basement. They had the basement set up as a church while they were building the upper church. And then once the church was built that neighborhood up there, I mean, was just all built up, all those streets up off Sabattus Street. So that was a big change, that people started getting more cars so they could get into town from there.

But before that the bus service, I mean, you could catch a bus every twenty minutes, ten minutes to go anywhere you wanted to in town. Because I used to leave the high school, catch a bus to go down to work on Lisbon Street. But they didn't always run as regularly on weekends, though. So, if you wanted to go out in high school, you hoped that one of your girlfriend's parents would let them use the car or you did a lot of walking.

But other than, you know, people just working very hard. And, of course, my high school years were about the time that the mills started closing and the shoe shops started closing. So people were leaving the city, a lot of people were leaving the city. And most of the people I went to high school with, a lot of them went away for quite a few years. Some have come back, but there were really no jobs to look forward to. Raytheon, when that came in, I can't remember if it was, had to have been in the late fifties, that was a big place to go work.

But other than that, people were still in the shoe shops. But then there were a lot of fires in the shoe shops that were, like the Union Street Bypass was not there at the time, that was, that part of Court Street had big shoe shops there. And where the Auburn Police Department is, that whole block there was all just straight big buildings of shoe shops. And there were some in the elderly housing down here at Oak Park, that was another shoe shop. So it was, as the shoe shops started closing they started, buildings were empty for a while and then some were torn down and some were renovated for other uses. But that was the biggest change while I was in high school, was the things that had kind of carried over from my mother's generation into mine really started disappearing.

And a lot of that had to do with, I guess in almost any big city, is that the urban sprawl and two car families and a lot of people in my mother's generation, the women never drove, never had the cars. A lot of women her age didn't start driving until they became widows, you know, just to get themselves around. And when I was growing up there were very few families that had two cars, so if dad used the car to go to work you either walked or found friends. But, you know, with people that lived in the city it wasn't difficult to get to where you wanted to because there weren't too many places for you to go that needed that long distance transportation.

AL: Do you recall any of the politicians like Louis Jalbert or Ernest Malenfant?

JD: Yeah, the names are familiar, you know, the names are familiar but, like I said, my relatives were not active in politics. And for me personally, because I was so just, you know, going to school and helping my mother at home and doing a lot of babysitting for my aunts and stuff. Even at high school there were really no active clubs for political action type things which, you know, high schools are very active now compared to back then. I make myself feel

so old when I think of it that way. But you know, we had things like Camera Club and French Club, and so there were clubs that kids belonged to.

But not very much of the outside world came into the Franco-American community. They were very close knit, very protective of each other. You know, if somebody had, one of the things the men did a lot was when they got out of work they'd go to their local club. There were a lot of clubs downtown, the Snowshoe Club and the Pastime Club, all with French names, and they'd stop in there, get caught up with their friends. And if somebody was having difficulty, you know, they'd all make a little anonymous donation and help each other out that way. They didn't go for public social services very much, but they just kind of supported each other emotionally, and sometimes financially, but their pride made them go out and work.

One of the things I feel bad about is that a lot of people in my generation, their parents didn't really expect them to go on to college. They were just so thrilled that they made it through high school, because they thought the high school degree was what guaranteed you a good job. Not necessarily going out of the state of Maine, they didn't expect their kids to leave Maine. But they thought, you know, if you've got a high school education then you can get a job with an accounting firm or, a lot of French, Franco-Americans, were very, very good with financial things, so a lot of them went into banking and accounting and management. But I can't really think of things that are that much different with Franco-Americans than a lot of other cultures of that time.

AL: Were there any, like family traditions that you had that came from your Franco-American background? Like foods, or events.

JD: Oh yes, always, always the, Christmas time is always the meat pies, the *tourtière*, and I still make them from scratch, and my mother always made them. And when my children were young, my husband's parents still had the *réveillon*, which was having your Christmas gifts and your, too much food, after midnight Mass. So the children would stay with their grandparents while my husband and I went to midnight Mass and when we'd come back we'd get them up if they had fallen asleep and we'd have our Christmas. So Christmas, opening gifts was not Christmas morning, well, actually it was morning but it was after the midnight Mass.

But when I was young, ten, twelve, fourteen, whatever, those years, we would go to my grandmother, my mother's mother on Christmas day. Christmas day was the big get together there. So with her, the majority of her twelve kids would be there with their kids, so there was some very big get-togethers. And my mother always baked my grandfather his cherry cake, that was her Christmas gift to him, and it was for him. The rest of the family had to have something else other than the cherry cake. And, you know, just the turkey and stuffing and ham, so there was always at least ten women in the kitchen putting together a meal, and the men somewhere just talking, getting caught up to each other. And the grandchildren playing games and singing songs and getting caught up to. Because some of my relatives, a few of my mother's brothers had stayed in the service and were from away, so that would probably be the only time of year we'd see some of them.

So it was, and our visit to our other grandmother would be Christmas Eve. You know,

Christmas Eve to one grandmother and Christmas day at the other one. And that went on for quite a few years until they got too old to handle get-togethers like that, or too many of the family moved away that it wasn't practical to make it home. The holidays was basically about the only time that was really things that you celebrated as family. But there were really no Franco festival type things in the city to pull together, people together. Like I said, my generation was always a very low profile of being Franco-American.

AL: You downplayed it.

JD: Yeah, because it was a lot more difficult even for a high school girl to get a job. It was good if she spoke French, because a lot of the customers were French, but they really didn't like it if they had too heavy a French accent so that their English speaking customers would be uncomfortable over not being able to hear them. One of the places that really had open arms for French speaking was the hospitals, because dealing with the elderly at that time, a lot of the elderly did not speak English.

But one thing that I found strange, not strange, but I used to have difficulty with is that a lot of the elderly could speak English, but they pretended they couldn't because they didn't like speaking with an accent, or they were afraid of not speaking correctly. So they just, if they were in public they would pretend ignorance. But now if you try to get them to speak French, they start off in French and they switch to English. I remember just, well not that long ago, I called one of my aunts and I started speaking French with her because I try to use every occasion I can, because I've forgotten so much of my French. And so we're speaking French and all of a sudden she switches to English. And so I stop and I said, "Can we keep speaking French?" She said, "Oh yeah, we were speaking French, weren't we?" I said, "Yes." She says, "I didn't realize that."

AL: Now, you've mentioned that French culture and language was downplayed and sort of not encouraged in public. And I know that at some point in the school system, at some point in time they tried to say 'no more speaking French in school'. Was that during your period of time in school? I can't recall what decade that was.

JD: Well, I think it was a little bit after my years in parochial school. In parochial school, especially where I was at St. Mary's the longest; we spoke French all day long. And we went to classes that were conducted in English, but the rest of the time was all spoken French. You know, like geography, that was an English thing because all the countries were in English, but you learned to say them in French because you spoke French, the nuns spoke French to you. So you were always thinking in French, and you were learning English kind of as a second language. I only went to the sixth grade, so by the time I got to high school, of course, it was all in English because I went to public high school, and I had a French teacher. If I chose to take French instead of Spanish, then you had a French teacher. But other than that it was all English.

I mean, French was not encouraged or you were told it was very impolite to speak French in front of people who did not speak French. So even if you were just saying something, you know, with a friend, if there was anybody around you that possibly didn't speak English [*sic* French], they preferred that you not. You were told that it was very impolite because they wouldn't

understand what you were saying. So people just stopped speaking French in public. And, you know, by then TV was out and so it was very difficult to teach our children French because it just wasn't there. Even my sister-in-law from Canada, who's been in the United States for twenty years, she speaks French, still speaks French to her children. And I've never heard them speaking French to her, they'll reply in English. So they understand it, but they just don't speak it. It's an interesting phenomenon.

AL: I notice we do have a couple local stations all in French now on television.

JD: Yeah, see, I don't get them out in Poland and I wish I did, but yeah, it's really nice. Because I belong to an association, *la Sur Vivance Française*, which is mostly elderly people, I feel kind of young when I go there.

AL: How do you spell that?

JD: S-U-R, V-I-V-A-N-C-E, Française is F-R-A-N-C-A-I-S-E, *Sur Vivance Française*.

AL: I apologize for interrupting you.

JD: I joined this a couple of years ago. It's an organization that's been around for ever and ever, and it's mostly women, it's all women, but they have a couple of activities a year that they invite their husbands to. And the meetings are conducted in French. And they have speakers that show, that would, like they had an attorney that came and talked about wills and things like that, and sometimes they have entertainment. The last meeting I think they had some children from, a girl and a couple of boys from St. Dominic's High School, from the French class, who had learned some French songs so they came and sang for us. It's interesting. They meet once a month through most of the year.

And, I almost forgot where I was going. Oh, the TV. One time they had somebody just speaking about the television service and stuff like that, how to not get robbed, how to look, you know, to save money and if you've got problems, you know, make sure that you call and tell people you have problems, don't just take it. But they were talking about the stations coming on and everybody was just so excited. But one of the big things is a lot of the elderly can't get out to go to Mass, you know, they can't make it to church. So a lot of them watch Mass on TV, which makes them feel like they're back in their old routine because you kind of judged your week by going to Mass on the weekend. And it's helping people, you know, be a little bit more aware that French is still an international language. And I don't know if you're aware that Lewiston is also the center for the Francophone -

AL: The Heritage Center?

JD: No, not the Heritage Center, this is a business thing where business people can be in touch with other countries that conduct business in French. *Francophone d'Affaires, Francophone d'Affaires*. And I think its office is in the, where the Chamber of Commerce is. So that's come into this area in the last few years, that service, so I think there's kind of a reawakening that French -

And one of the things I'm finding since I'm trying to remember my French is, there's a lot of words I don't know. And, you know, people say, "Well, how come?" I can read French quite well, but I have a hard time speaking it because just going to the sixth grade I didn't get all the verb conjugations down pat. But the French that we speak here in Lewiston is a very old French. I remember a friend of mine had gone for her master's degree and she was doing some genealogy stuff and she had gone to France and she was speaking French. And someone had told her she was speaking sixteenth century French, some of the words she was using. And it's understandable because most of the French we learned here was brought from the farms of Canada, they were never involved in the business world as such. And so, you know, and I'm not that old, but even since I was in school there's so much more in the world. There was not all the electronic stuff, so you didn't have French words for those things. And if you haven't kept up, it's just, there's just so much more to know. And most people here in Lewiston, their French is family, family French, church French, and so the, and I said, well, it's not slang, I said, it's our own patois.

AL: Oh, that's neat.

JD: So I'm trying to, and my grandchildren now are starting to show some interest in French, they're taking French at school. So it's nice to see it being picked up again, because it's a very small world. I guess I've probably talked more than you wanted me to.

AL: No, no, no. Is there anything else that I haven't asked you that you feel is important to add? Any person, a Franco-American in town, you know, someone who stuck out in your mind as prominent?

JD: Well, for me I didn't, you know, like I said, I didn't get, I was so involved in just family that I didn't get to know anybody and meet anybody that I can think of. The only one that's a very prominent person that's in some way connected is, in doing some family research is, my husband's grandfather was the first surgeon at St. Mary's Hospital. And in doing some Franco-American research, you know, I pick up things about him every once in a while, that he was a very loved doctor, a very big hearted, very generous man. And there are still some, he's been dead for a long, long time but there are still some people that just remember him. And my husband's father was nicknamed "Doc" after his father, because his father had been the doctor. But just researching from the Franco-American people in the area, you know, I just run across names every once in a while that have this little connection here or there, but I personally did not have contact that I can think of. I wasn't in the public that much.

AL: Well great, thank you very much.

JD: You're welcome.

End of Interview