Daniel: It’s approximately 11:35, April 21, 1998. I’m Daniel Desjardins with the Franco-American Studies class at USM. I’m going to be interviewing Mr. Robert Hamel; he is a long time resident of Lewiston. Tell me Mr. Hamel, how long have you been a resident of Lewiston?

Robert: I’m 80, I’m going to be 80 in June. I’m not pushing it too fast. Anyway, I’m going to be 80 in June. I lived in Lewiston all my life.

Daniel: all your life?

Robert: Yah, I’ve been here all my life. Like I say, my folks came from Canada, one came from Lister, near Montreal and my father came from Carmel, Ontario. When he came to Lewiston he couldn’t even speak French.

Daniel: He couldn’t speak French?

Robert: No, everybody that came from Canada, they used to get off at the Grand Trunk Station right on Lincoln St. They had people living there. They all get together and work together, live together soon as they got a place together. A lot of the mill tenements that they had.

Daniel: Yah, they had a lot of mill tenements.

Robert: I got some nice books that you can take and look at. Anyway, my father was a great politician. He always had a job with the politics. He was the janitor at city hall, then he would take care of the ball park and stuff like that. My mother stayed home, had 13 kids.

Daniel: 13 kids so you where were you in those 13? Were you the youngest?

Robert: I was, let’s see, 5 younger than me, the rest older.

Daniel: How many brothers and sisters?
Robert: I had 3 brothers and the rest were sisters. I had 4 brothers and three of my brothers are dead now. I am only the brother that is living. I got my sisters.

Daniel: They had some large families back then.

Robert: Oh, Jesus, you know they believed in the [pause] the priest told them you know when you go, you need to have a kid. That is my sisters and brothers [indicates]. There is only one brother left, Roland. We had 13 of them. I’ll tell you we used to stay in about four in a room.

Daniel: Do you recall when your parents, your parents met here in Lewiston, got married here in Lewiston or did they meet in Canada?

Robert: Yah, they moved here in Lewiston. When they moved here, they lived in Jay, ME. My father had a farm there. His brother, the politician, says, “Get away from there, come home. Come over with me in Lewiston.” So he got him a job as a janitor at Lewiston High School. He worked for the city almost all this life. My mother never worked. He sold that farm in Livermore for $500 and he come back. It’s in Jay now.

Daniel: Do you know what your parents did in Canada for work? Were they farmers?

Robert: I couldn’t tell you that,

Daniel: Cause there was a lot of famers that couldn’t make a go of farming in Canada and they migrated down here to the mill towns. The mills came in.

Robert: As far as I know, they worth, like a say, just came back to Lewiston to work.

Daniel: Do you have an experience working in the mills at all?

Robert: I worked one month.

Daniel: One month and that was enough.

Robert: After I got out of there I started driving a truck for Pepsi Cola truck. As I went along I had, I was driving a big truck. I had to stop driving that because too much shaking. After that, what did I do after that? That was in 1942, I guess, then I went to work for Hahnel Brothers, just when I come out of the service. I worked to work for them for, I worked 37 years there.

Daniel: What was it about the mils that changed your mind so quick. Was it the heat?

Robert: I could not stand it, the heat and everything else, noisy.

Daniel: You said you worked for Hannafords? Robert: So he said you worked for Hannafords?
Robert: Hahnel Brothes, the roofing – the biggest outfit in the state here.

Daniel: That was tough work then.

Robert: Oh boy, I guess.

Daniel: Is there a lot of hazards in that job?

Robert: Oh yes, I fell off three times. One time they come to pick me up in a basket. They didn’t think I would make it but I came back. I rolled down a roof that 30 ft, then I hit a pipe staging, then I went down another 30 ft.

Daniel: Today now you have to have a belt, safety belts and everything else to be working.

Robert: Today you can’t...

Daniel: That was one thing I was curious about was – I – still today there is a lot of French Americans are known for their hard work.

Robert: You would think most of the people around here, they get a job, they stick to it. Most of them.

Daniel: I think that in the mills I got the impression that a lot of Franco-Americans were taken advantage of in a way and there was a lot of unsafe work. There wasn’t too much complaining.

Robert: They were getting what, I think my father was getting about 7 or 8 dollars a week. They had 13 kids. We ate a lot, what they called, of [?] and [?], like a dumpling. My mother used to make that and all kinds of stuff like that. These guys that had grocery stores, they would run up bills for them and they never bothered them as long as they keep a little going every day.

Daniel: Tell me how far you went along in school?

Robert: I went two years of high school.

Daniel: Two years of high school. So you started work pretty early?

Robert: Oh yah, I got out of that....

Daniel: What age did you start working?

Robert: I was skipping school most of the time so my father called, somebody seen me in the theater, they called my father up and they told him that they had seen his boy in the theater. So, that night he come home and they told him about it. He called up the school, I didn’t even register that year.

Anyway, I got out and started to work.
Daniel: About what age were you then?

Robert: I was about 15, 16, something like that. I worked all kinds of jobs.

Daniel: How about any kinds of benefits that you can remember. Did you used to get benefits? Were you employers pretty fair?

Robert: The people I worked for, the wages were good, and they had good benefits and everything.

Daniel: Even way back then huh? Ok. Some vacation time?

Robert: After – we had the union for awhile, but then they threw it out. They weren’t helping us any. The guy took off with the money and all the stuff like that. Our boss told us, he says, you can stay in the union or you can get out but we won’t have no union in this place. You will get the same benefits you are getting and everything. So, we stayed there. I was getting good money. When I quit there, I was getting $11 an hour.

Daniel: Did they help patch you back up after you fell of the roof three or four times?

Robert: I guess, yah…they used to call me the flying Frenchman. I went flying three times. Another time I was up in Augusta, at the nuthouse, was going up a ladder and the nuts started throwing shit at me, after that, I went boom. Then I lost two fingers. I was cutting some insulation. I lost them two fingers at Edwards Mill in Augusta. These two never bothered me, this one bothered me. I tried to get some money for, they never want to pay.

Daniel: What were you doing at the mill?

Robert: I was putting a roof and cutting insulation. Somebody hollered, “Hey lunch!” The fingers feel off. They used to save them and put them together but they asked me, “Where is your fingers?” I says, “I don’t know.” I went back. I was out of there a couple of days later. I went there and one of the guys told me he threw it to the seagulls.

Daniel: Were the jobs hard to come by back then, was it pretty hard to find a job?

Robert: Well, after I come out of the service you could get a job pretty good, but before there, get jobs washing dishes and stuff like that. You got about $5 a week, not enough to live on. I got married, I was, when I got married, I was getting $7 a week working in the shoe shop. I used to have a paper route...Sunday paper run, I would make more on Sunday then I did all week then working in the shoe shop.

Daniel: It must have been hot work, a lot of heat, hot...shoeshop.

Robert: No, not too bad; I was cutting staples and sizing out the shoes. The Jews used to come over and say, “Hamel, you are murdering the shoes.” I told my brother, next time he tells me that I’m quitting. He come
over one morning and he tells me, hey, “Hamel, you are murdering the shoes.” I says, “Yah, well I’m going to stop murdering your shoes, I’m all done!” I took off.

Daniel: How do you think that the Franco Americans gone along with the other ethnic groups, like you said the Jewish...

Robert: When we first moved, when we was young there, they called us frogs, you know. The Irishmen and Polacks and everything – we couldn’t, up the Bleachery hill, going up the Bleachery Hill was all Irish. You couldn’t even go there. They had that Bleachery, that was all Irish in there. They didn’t have many Frenchmen in there. The Frenchmen were down at Bates Mill. You know are, all they start calling us Frenchmens, when England owned New England here, they owned that. The French used to come down and ship different stuff and everything. The Frenchmen would be out there wild away time, they were shooting crap. They called it crappaud, that’s French; they started calling them crauppad, frogs, you know. So that has always stayed with us around here. They called us Frogs, then they shortened up the English shortened up this crappaud, they shortened up to crap, was shooting crap all the time. Well anyway, that is, they used to call us frogs all the time, fight all the time. We couldn’t go up the hill there. We would go skating or something.

Daniel: We had heard that, I had read in some books, in class we talked about it too, that Franco Americans were more willing to work for less money and that created a problem with some of the Irish people.

Robert: There were so many of them. They had more Frenchmens, French, Franco, than any other nationality. There were so many of them that they had to work, they worked. They had a problem there to I guess.

Daniel: Do You, let’s see, you said you were almost 80 years old, do you ever recall the strike in 1937?

Robert: ’37, yes, in the shoe shops. That was the last time I had worked in the shoe shops. I was what they call a treeer, they finish the shoe before it goes to the packing room. I was a treeer there. I worked there about a month on that, then they had that strike. Everybody went out. My brother says that when you see a boxcar go by, take the number, put it down, they will pay you for it. We got out in ’37 and I never went back in the shoe shop, no.

Daniel: From my understanding they had the National Guard in, there was rioting, gas masks, they had fixed bayonets. They would stop people on the street.

Robert: Oh yah, you couldn’t go across the bridge or nothing. They really had – well, Lewiston and Auburn used to be the great shoe city but everything went, the mill and that, everything went.

Daniel: I heard something about the first union that first came here. That was quite some opposition to unionization around Lewiston and Auburn which was because of the low wages. Some of the hard work that some of the people were doing and the conditions that were pretty hazardous, I got the feeling that they were more concerned with having a job then ruffling any feathers.
Robert: Yes, they needed the money.

Daniel: It was a tough time.

Robert: Everybody had big families then.

Daniel: You told me that you went to school, St. Peter's?

Robert: St. Peter's, I went there three years.

Daniel: Is that a parochial school?

Robert: most of us went there till we got first communion and the confirmation then the people would take us out of there because it costs too much money to go there. We used to go to public school after that. They took us off after, I was in – I learned how to read and write French and never forgot it.

Daniel: Were the nuns good to you?

Robert: Yah, they were good but just the idea we wanted to be following the other guys.

Daniel: I got a picture that they were very strict and probably not like school today. Tell me a little bit about religion, was it a big part of your life and your parents’?

Robert: Yah, that is right, we never missed church and I still don’t, every Sunday.

Daniel: Some of the stuff that we have gone over, even with the union, they were talking about people going to their priest to find out if it was ok to go to union meetings and if it was okay. It was almost like a –

Robert: Whatever the priest said, went. That is why they had big families.

Daniel: Do you think that is why people were a lot more tighter family organized then today?

Robert: Oh yes, they didn’t have all kinds of stuff. My father used to, on Sunday night that was a treat for us. He would go get some of that taffy every Sunday night.

Daniel: is there any special music or anything, were you a musical family? I know that there is a lot of fiddling?

Robert: No, my family wasn’t too musical, no.
Daniel: Storytelling type of thing?

Robert: No, there was a little sport but we wasn’t too talented in music.
Daniel: So, your mother made sure that you went to church every Sunday and the priest was number one man.

Robert: Oh yes, you see I wrote this – there was, I think, six church or four church and four right on Bates St, you could stand on Main Street and look up, could see them all. They had a lot of snowshoers clubs all over town.

Daniel: Do you belong to any clubs now?

Robert: I belong to couple but they are not like they used to be. They were all snowshoers clubs. There was one of the biggest that isn’t around anymore, Les Montangards, if you wasn’t a Frenchman, you couldn’t get in there. Then after awhile, they start letting them in, just like on the strip here. For awhile they couldn’t let no black people in. One club, they would let them in. Geez, the guy was making out like mad, he had all kinds. Then they started letting them in different clubs.

[indicates] Now this is all the different places and the school we went to, you know. That is the city hall, library, there is a lot of history there. The Dewitt Hotel used to be on the corner there. That was the biggest hotel they had in the state, I don’t know if it was biggest in the state, but the biggest hotel.

When you see all them chimneys there, that was a fireplace before they fixed them. When I worked for Hamel brothers, I would there, I had to take them all off. They wanted to know where I was going to put them but I threw then back down in the, couldn’t hurt anything so,

Daniel: Down the flue,

Robert: That is B. Pecks there, all that.

Daniel: You said that you were in the military.

Robert: Yes, I was in the service, 26 months, 1944-46.

Daniel: Which branch? Were you with the army?

Robert: Yah, the army. I didn’t go overseas. [indicates] That’s the bridges; there is the mills that used to be, all the mills. I see Canal Street.

Daniel: So the mills were pretty much the biggest employers around this town?

Robert: Oh, yah, the mills was on the other side of – they had all these tenements for the mill workers. They lived 4 or 5 in a rooms sometimes.

Daniel: The living conditions, I heard, were – some of the living conditions from those tenements were pretty bad. Do you recall anything about that or?
Robert: Well, I never, my mother said that we always had this house, we rented, moved around, I was born here right on Park Street. I never thought I would be back when I got old, this old. It was my neighborhood, we used to go across the street in the park and swim and everything.

Daniel: Well, that is all the questions I got. If you would like to add anything else?

Robert: No, but I will show you what I do, that is what I do.

Daniel: Oh yes, tell us about what you do now. Are you a volunteer?

Robert: [indicates] Headstart, that is where I work now. See on the other side there is another –

Daniel: and you do this..?

Robert: 20 hours a week. Keeps me from going crazy.

Daniel: teach them their ABCs and do some crafts with them.

Robert: When I go in, I set up the table for breakfast. When they come in, I say, “Go wash your hands.” Then they sit down, after they eat brush your teeth, they got to brush their teeth, all stuff like that. After they are through breakfast I play with them till noontime, different game. Yes, good bunch of kids. I got a picture I want to show you. My mother had that, every Frenchman had one of them –

[Interview ends]