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**Oral History Interview with John Schott, Grand Trunk Railway Depot, Lewiston, Me**

**Thursday, June 14, 2001**

**Interviewed by: Kelly Pelletier, Barry Rodrigue.**

**Transcribed: Betty Lebrun, James Myall, 2012**

**Kelly:** I'm at the Grand trunk Railway Depot in Lewiston, Me, with owner John Schott. We'll be talking about his history with the depot. Also present will be Barry Rodrigue and Gerry Dewaters, who is taking photographs.

**Kelly:** John, can you tell me how you began your interest in the depot?

**John:** Ah, yes, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, my father owned a Harley Davidson dealership in Lewiston and our motorcycles, Harley Davidson Motorcycles, used to be shipped from Milwaukee, WI to Lewiston on the Grand Trunk Railroad, by the Grand Trunk Railroad. They arrived here at the freight yard, here next to, at a depot, station warehouse that was adjacent to the depot. During the 50s and 60s, I used to come and a young child to help people pick up motorcycles. Then in the early to mid 60s, after I got my license and started working at the dealership, continued to come down by myself to pick up the Harley Davidsons. I always admired the depot."

**Kelly:** So during that time the train was just used to carry equipment or was it still being used for passengers?

**John:** I don't think there was regular scheduled passenger service, but I do remember during that time that the railroad used to run at least special excursion trains, and I remember Canadian snowshoers coming in by special train to attend the snow shoe convention festival that used to be held in the wintertime here in Lewiston.

**Kelly:** Wow, that sounds really neat. Do you know about when the Depot stopped being used?

**John:** Um, by the railroad station I believe it was ah, by Grand Trunk, I believe it was during that period of time, in the early 60's.

**Kelly:** Do you know what happened to the Depot after it closed down?

**John:** I don't know of all the exact details but I believe the City of Lewiston, or the Lewiston-Auburn Railroad Company took over the management of it from the Grand Trunk Railroad, after they no longer

needed it. I'm not sure if the lease had expired. I think the lease, their 100-year lease, 99-year lease from the Lewiston-Auburn Railroad Company to the Grand Trunk Railroad probably expired about 1975 or '76 and after that period of time the Lewiston-Auburn Railroad Company took over the ownership or management of the stations and I do know that they had for a period of time, they allowed the Tri-County Mental Health, I believe, to use it for their – for the services that they provided.

**Kelly:** And when did you become interested in the Depot again?

**John:** Well I always had an interest in it but in January, I believe, of 1987, the City of Lewiston and a local newspaper stated – ran a news article saying that they were soliciting bids, or people that might have an interest in making use of the Depot to contact them, which I did do.

**Kelly:** And what did you want to do with the Depot?

**John:** At that time, I was really appalled at the deteriorated condition of the building. It had fallen into really complete disrepair and was approaching the point where it was not salvageable. So I guess my immediate interest was to do the repairs to the building that would be necessary to preserve it allow it to remain standing.

**Kelly:** What kind of repairs did you need to do?

**John:** Um, well at that time, maybe we are getting ahead of ourselves a little bit, I did wind up negotiating with the city of Lewiston to purchase it. So, after that, I think I purchased it in November, middle of the winter of – November 25<sup>th</sup> of 1987 and at that time the building had deteriorated to state at the point where I don't think it would have survived another year without major restoration, and during that winter, I and a crew of my employees from the motorcycle business did come down and during the winter, late fall-winter of 1987 and the spring of 1988, completed a substantial structural renovation of the Depot.

That did involve – part of the first floor had fallen in to the basement from rot, some of the exterior walls from water running through the roof had deteriorated the brick walls to the point where they were in danger of collapsing. So, during the winter we, we moved 120 ton, I believe, of coal ashes and junk from the cellar and restored the foundation, poured a cement floor and that. We tore off the old roof, replaced about a third of the boards on the roof, sheathed it with 5/8 inch plywood, installed a new roof. I had the walls that were, sections to walls that were crumbling repaired and the rest of the outside brick work repainted and repaired and we also at that time restored the one chimney that was still intact and had the second chimney on the rear end of the building rebuilt to its original shape and condition

**Kelly:** When did you say you had started the repairs?

**John:** Ah, we started the repairs, I believe, November 25, the same day I signed the deed on the building.

**Kelly:** And what years was that?

**John:** 1987.

**Kelly:** What other work do you feel needs to be done?

**John:** Right now the building has been restored structurally but for any type of use, the interior as you look around and see is a complete disaster. Tri-County Mental Health put in some new lower ceilings. They added some walls. The water, because the roof was leaking so bad, the original plaster walls and a lot of wood has completely disintegrated, so the building needs a complete renovation inside, all the windows although the wood frames are still original, wood frames are still intact and could be saved, all have to be rebuilt and all of the mechanical systems, electrical, plumbing, heating would have to be replaced.”

**Kelly:** What was your biggest challenge in restoring the building?

**John:** The biggest challenge work wise, physically, was to remove the 120 ton of debris and trash from the cellar. One of the more challenging parts was to do the research and try to do the work that I have completed to the quality and same of some of the construction that originally was where you try to do an authentic restoration where you are using the same mortar mix that the – that it was built with for the chimneys and the walls.

**Barry Rodrigue:** How did you determine the mortar mix?

**John:** The mason that I hired to do it had been in business for 30 or 40 years, Mr. Duchamps, and he was familiar with the - we also did some research in libraries in what was used and also, I believe some of the publications put out by the federal government on restoration of historic buildings.

**Barry:** And you were saying about the chimneys, how the top of the chimneys are cut, that the bricks are cut?

**John:** Yes, the two sections to the chimney, part way of the sizes reduced, and then on the very top they flare back out and then go back in. Normally they do that by just stepping the bricks so the lines would be rectangular steps. The original chimneys on this building, the bricks themselves were sorted and beveled so the line going in was a smooth plane and that is the way we did it. I think just the two chimneys, to have the tops of those rebuilt, cost me, I believe in the \$10,000 bracket. A large part of that cost was attributed to, to the configuration to the original design.

**Barry:** Who was Mr. Duchamps?

**Barry:** Mr. Duchamps was a mason, I believe he now lives in Turner but he was a very good friend of a gentleman by the name of Richard, I believe Richard Bilodeau, who worked , I believe at one of the local banks. But Mr. Bilodeau unfortunately passed away just a few years before I purchased the building, but for the last five or ten – ten or fifteen years in Mr. Bilodeau’s life – he also took a great interest in the Depot and had worked very hard and submitted some proposes to the Lewiston/Auburn Railroad Company to – for the Franco American Historical Society, I’m not sure of the organization, but one of the organizations he belonged to – to gain use and ownership of the Depot for a Franco-American Cultural

Center and Mr. Duchamps took a special interest, and his work here at the Depot, in memory of Mr. Bilodeau.

**Barry:** You were explaining earlier how you got the debris from the cellar out of the building. Could you recount that?

**John:** Ah, yes, as I said, we removed over 120 ton of ash and some debris from the cellar and I can attest to that, because I think I paid \$1,000 or \$1,200 for dumping fees to the City of Lewiston at their landfill or recycling plant, but we used a small powered Honda wheelbarrow, built ramps so we would load 300 or 400 pounds of debris by hand shoveling on to this powered wheelbarrow and drive it - walk behind , walk behind - drove it up the ramp that we constructed out of the cellar and into a dumpster that we had rented and positioned outside of the Depot, so it was all strictly hand work other than using this powered wheelbarrow to transport it outside.

**Barry:** Now where did the cinders and everything come from?

**John:** Um, I don't know, I presume the station - for I believe the first 50 or 75, 50 years of its existence - was heated by I think on one of the inventory lists I have from Canadian National, listed two, I believe, Baker Coal stoves as being part of the inventory. So the depot would have been heated by coal for at least half of its life and I assume that a lot of the ashes were from those coal stoves."

**Barry:** Did they just them out on the cellar?

**John:** That appears to be what they did.

**Barry:** Huh, I would think they would be worried about fire, to have a better use for the cellar, but you uncovered a cistern down there as well?"

**John:** Yes, either a cistern or a well. It looks like a water cistern, yes, and we also, when we had the brick worked done to the exterior of the building, we also had that restored to its original shape.

**Barry:** And did you find any other artifacts.

**John:** Very few; we did gather 15 or 20 pieces of slate, that were a part of the original roof and also some metal ornamental - iron metal pieces that looked like they might have been parts of benches or settees that might have been outside the building and I think one or two old window weights.

**Barry:** Have you found any papers or anything between the walls or used as laden covers?

**John:** No, unfortunately most of the original, artifacts of the interior of the building had already been destroyed or removed by previous tenants. It's really a shame that the City of Lewiston or the Lewiston-Auburn Railroad company didn't just not haul it when they took ownership of it to, to retain the original memorabilia interior.

**Barry:** Is the Lewiston/Auburn Railway Company still in existence?

**John:** Um, I'm not sure if they are or not. They were trying to - I know for the last 10 or 15 years, try to - rid themselves of any of the real estate that they own. They have done that by selling or giving to the City of Lewiston the land on the other side of the Canal for the Railroad Park, and I think they might have sold the another lot adjacent to the building to the City of Lewiston. So, I'm not sure if they still own the right of way from here to Lewiston Junction, the 5 ½ mile path or railroad bed of the original Lewiston Junction, Lewiston Branch.

**Barry:** Who were some of the members, do you remember, from the Railway Company?

**John:** The one person I primarily dealt with, was Mr. Gerry Berube, who was the, used to be the clerk of the, Lewiston Auburn Railroad Company, was clerk for the City of Lewiston. I believe he was one of the directors in that capacity and his position with the City of Lewiston, one of the members of the Lewiston-Auburn Railroad Company and the other person I remember was John Cleveland, who was the mayor of the City of Auburn and Mr. Berube and Mr. Cleveland are the two people that I negotiated with for the purchase of the building.

**Barry:** Was the public company or private?

**John:** It was a semi public. It was a private corporation but it was - the two principals of it, the city of Lewiston and the city of Auburn.

**Barry:** Don't let me hog everything. Jump in anytime.

**Kelly:** This is great.

**Barry:** You described the warehouse on the other side at all. Tell us what you remember from when you used to pick up motorcycles over there?"

**John:** It was just a small ah, one story building, wood frame structure, with a loading dock on the deeper side, adjacent to the railroad tracks where they would unload the freight cars, the freight cars were at the dock height, and the building was relatively narrow, maybe 30 feet or so wide. On the other side of the building they had doors and docks where trucks could back up and load freight. So the first floor of the floor level was four feet or so above ground level at the level of the floors of the freight cars.

**Barry:** How long was the building?

**John:** It must have been 75 or 80 ft long, approximately the size of the Depot, which I think is 30 ft by 75 ft.

**Barry:** Was it about the same in height?

**John:** My recollection is that it had a little bit lower eve height than the roof - it wasn't quite as high.

**Kelly:** Where exactly was it located?"

**Barry:** Right over next to those tracks in the parking lot over there, with the grass just before the parking lot. Remember we found that bird's-eye view of a Lewiston Map and it showed two buildings associated with the Grand Trunk Station; that was the other building."

**Kelly:** I was just trying to get more specific than pointing.

**Barry:** Good point.

**John:** It would have been west or southwest of the building. I believe that building, I think I have seen articles where that was, I think, destroyed by a fire.

**Barry:** About when do you imagine that it was destroyed?

**John:** It must have been some time after 1965 or '66 because I was, during that period of time I think I was still coming to pick up motorcycles out of it. So it would have been some time after 1965 and I don't remember it being here for the last 30 years or so. So it must have been in the mid- to late 60s when it was destroyed.

**Barry:** What are your hopes for this building?

**Kelly:** That was my question!

**Barry:** Oh, sorry, go ahead and ask it.

**Kelly:** No, it's very obvious that this building holds a lot of sentimental value for you. You put a lot of time, effort, and money into the restoration of it. I was just wondering, like Barry, what are your hopes for the future of the building?

**John:** Um, my hopes for the building are that some use can be found for it; hopefully, a public or semi-public use that will allow the public to come in. That will allow the building to be certain that it will be intact the way that it is, which I will insist when I sell the depot and also there is a stipulation when I purchased it from the Lewiston-Auburn Railroad Company that the exterior of the building would remain, architecturally the way it is. I will probably be even more restrictive in the deed when I sell it.

But I would like to see some use of it that would allow for the continued and authentic restoration of the interior of the building, windows, and doors. What you said might be, I'm not sure. At one time I thought it would have been an excellent building for a Franco-American cultural center of some type, since the history of it is so embedded in the migration of the people from Canada into the Lewiston-Auburn area during the late 1800s and early 1900s.

**Kelly:** Is there anything else you would like discuss that we might not have touched on?

**John:** Not that I can think of. One thing is that another gentleman has expressed an interest in the building, a Mr. Ford Reike, and he and his family have a very positive track record on the restoration and preservation of a few historic buildings in the state of Maine, so I'm really hoping that he may be able to, he is soliciting ideas and is willing to work or to even transfer his option to purchase to some other

organization that will be able to continue with the restoration of the depot. I think that is pretty exciting.

**Kelly:** It is, that would be wonderful to get this building restored. It's an incredible building. Well, thank you John.

**John:** Yes.

**Barry:** And bravo for a good job!

**End.**