

James: This is an oral history interview with Simone Deschaines, interviewed 6/12/14). We are on Russell Street in Lewiston. So can you start by telling me your full name and you maiden name?

Simone: Simone Levesque.

James: When were you born?

Simone: August 24, 1941.

James: What were your parent's names?

Simone: Alfred Levesque and \_\_\_\_\_

Do you know what your mother's maiden name was?

Simone: Cote

James: Were you born here in Lewiston?

Simone: No, I was born in Madawaska.

James? Your parents, were they also born in Madawaska?

Simone: No, they both came from France.

James: Directly from France?

Simone: My daughter did the geneology and that is all she could do in Madawaska \_\_\_\_\_.

James: So, they were actually born in France and they come to the United States?

Simone: Yah.

James: Do you know what part of France?

Simone: No I don't.

James: Okay, alright. What did your parents do for a living?

Simone: I don't know, Farm, big farm, potatoes, hay, oats and everything. I have even peeled wood and my father had it laid. I'm French...

James: No, that is okay.

Simone: In boards and he piled them and people would buy it to make houses. When I was 5, I picked potatoes, 5 years old, the whole family was, we never hired anybody. My father hired one when I got married, that is it.

James: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Simone: My mother had 22, but four were born dead and one died of heart disease. My mom was pregnant when she died. We had a wood stove with a door in the front and she was polishing my father's shoes to go to a wedding and her nightgown caught fire. She was in the hospital a month. The night, before I went to see her. I was 13, you had to be 14 to go in. I put a one year higher and my sister one year higher and went to see her. She says I'm ready, I'm ready to go home. Bring my nightgowns and the next day she died. The baby rotted and it poisoned her. I had a funny feeling she was going to die. So I saw her the night before she died.

James: So you were still in Madawaska?

Simone: Yah.

James: Okay. Tell me about how you, how you, is the reason you mother died, is that why you came to the Healey A.

Simone: No, I stayed home, then I met my husband. There was no work up there, only Fasier Paper. It's a different name now. Somebody was looking for a babysitter before that. I went to CT for a year to babysit, then I went back home. I met my husband that night cause my husband and my brother-in-law were friends and I went to the drive in with them. That was in September, we got married in April and we moved to Bangor, the same day because he had a job up there.

James: How old were you:

Simone: I was 17.

James: When you moved to Bangor, did you carry on working after you were married?

Simone: No, no I didn't. My husband worked. We were there three years then moved to Ct. because he delivered telephone poles and his boss gave him \$60 a week. He brought it down to \$48, we couldn't live on that. We had two children so we moved to Ct. I never liked it there. We lived there 14 years and I never liked it so we moved back too, well my husband came from Frenchville and we rented his mother and father's house for three years. Then the owners wanted to see the traffic \_\_\_\_\_ and the house was right near the road, so they dynamited—it was on a rock—they dynamited it and one \_\_\_\_\_ in an apartment and they took it down \_\_\_\_\_ and he gave the house to his brother-in-law. There was a brook and the patio was going down in the brook. We lived there three years.

James: Where did you live in Ct.?

Simone: The first time in New Britian and then South Wilmington, then we moved back to \_\_\_\_\_.

James: Where there Franco Americans in this area, were you living with other Franco Americans, your neighbors.

Simone: yah, I had another friend that was French. Her husband was English...we went shopping together. We went to eat together.

James: but there wasn't a big community of French people there. When you were all growing up, did you all speak French at home?

Simone: No, not really

James: English?

Simone: My two younger children know how to speak...well, I had a son that passed away, he was 44, but my youngest daughter can talk French. The two old ones can't. They understand but they can't speak it.

James: But when you were a child did you speak French as a child?

Simone: Yah, but when we went to school, the nuns were principals and teachers and if we got caught speaking French, we would get punished. So we had to learn English, fast! So that is how I learned English.

James: Even though, were the nuns French as well?

Simone: Oh yah.

James: but they made you speak English.

Simone: They were very strict.

James: But that was all the time, even in the playground, like even at recess?

Simone: and the girls were on that side and the boys were on the other side. I remember that.

James: So tell me a little bit about how you came to work at the Healey A.?

Simone: We after I had babysat in CT for a year, I went to live with my brother and in two days his wife didn't want me there. So they brought me to the Healey A. to work.

James: Your brother and his wife, were they living up in Madawaska as well?

Simone: No, they were living in Hartford.

James: Oh in Hartford, ok. So why did they bring you to Lewiston?

Simone: They didn't want me there. They only had two bedrooms and they had two daughters and a son \_\_\_\_\_

James: But how come they didn't, how come you didn't go back home to Madawaska?

Simone: I did after a year. I worked at the Healey A. and in the summer I went to Don Bosco Camp. Then we came back to Lewiston and that is when I went home, and I went back to school. I met my husband.

James: Did you tell me that your sister was a nun at the Healey A.?

Simone: Yes, she was, she was a teacher.

James: What was her name?

Simone: \_\_\_\_\_Levesque. \_\_\_\_\_they kept their names, there name. Some they change it.

James: How much older than you:

Simone: 19 years

James: 19 years older than you? So you were 14 at the time, is that right?

Simone: 15

James: Okay, so she would have been...

Simone: She is 91/92, I don't know. I haven't see her and she used to have a nun type letters for her cause she has got chronic fatigue syndrome. I haven't heard from her in three years so, maybe Dianne has passed away, I don't know. I haven't had a birthday card, nothing in two years and I always did.

James: Do you know why she went to become a sister of Charity?

Simone: No I don't, she was a lot older than me.

James: did you come to the Healey A. to work?

Simone: Yes, and I worked hard for 50 cents an hour. I lived there. I paid \$8 to live there and I got \$7 pay.

James: So you got \$7 after you paid your \$8 rent?

Simone: and I saved that. When I got married, I bought my wedding dress with my sister in law. I put it in the bank.

James: They would feed you as well:

Simone: Oh yah, we ate good there but we worked hard.

James: So what kind of things did you do?

Simone: Well I worked in the laundry mat...like the \_\_\_\_\_in the house, that used to be the laundry mat. The maintenance man lived above there. He had a daughter, than he had adopted another daughter. I used to go there and his wife was so nice. We would have a good time when I was off on the weekends sometimes.

James: So this was, the laundry was at the Healey A. the same or next door?

Simone: Right in the back. On Mondays I used to iron white shirts. If they had a stain, they would change and they had kids 2 years old. They were hard to iron. My sister had to pray till 11, then she would help me. We ironed to 2 in the morning.

James: Wow.

Simone: The next day I would press the pants, press on it, turn it over press that side, and the next day we would iron sheets with big rollers. I had floor sanders and I had to take the sand off, the varnish off. It took me two days. It took a long long time. The next day I had to do the stairs.

James: You were doing that just on your hands and knees with the sander.

Simone: Yah, yah, it was hard. They had those things where you polished the floors. They were bigger than me but I had to use those. I did the dining room, the halls, up to the gate, every time. I had to do it. They were hard to turn cause I weighed probably about 85 lbs.

James: So was that typical you were working till one or two in the morning?

Simone: Every Monday.

James: Every Monday...What about the other days, did you do long hours at that too?

Simone: Yah, long hours but not as long.

James: Did you just work Monday to Friday?

Simone: No, on the weekend too.

James: You would work on the weekends as well?

Simone: Oh yes.

James: Seven days a week?

Simone: Yes, I had a couple of hours off.

James: How many other people were there like you, were there other young women working there as well?

Simone: Yah, there was and there is one that I would like to find out where she is cause after I got married, we moved to \_\_\_\_\_. We tried to find her, she wasn't home. I had gone to camp with her and I was around that camp but I couldn't remember where she lived...I never found her. She was a good friend and she had a sister but she was mentally ill. I don't know what kind it was.

James: How many other young women were their there?

Simone: Let's see, there was about 16...

James: About 16?

Simone: In dining. Then there was \_\_\_\_\_ 6 – 12 and 52 young ones.

James: How old were the youngest boys there?

Simone: There were \_\_\_\_\_ kids with diapers. There was three boys there, parents used to fight all the time. Little boy told us one morning, “my father broke the stove last night”...they would come, they’d go, they’d come, they’d go.

James: What were some of the reasons why they boys were there at the orphanage?

Simone: A lot of them, their parents worked and they brought them there to be babysat and they then would come and get them at night but there was almost 200 at the same time. When they were 12, they had to go someplace...I don’t know where because a lot of them didn’t have any parents...like my brothers, they went home. That is why I went \_\_\_\_\_ my sisters and my brothers, cause I am the youngest girl and I have three younger brothers, well I had..one went to the Vietnam war and he died in 1963....It was never the same after that. So, I have two brothers and a sister in Madawaska, the others are in CT. and my sister in Quebec. There are still 9. My older sister still \_\_\_\_\_. I don’t know how old she is. She is in her 90s and she lives in Farmington, ME

James: Did you think most of the people there, were most of the young boys there from French families or was there a mixture?

Simone: They were mixed. They mostly talked English.

James: So they mostly talked English?

Simone: Yah, A lot of them \_\_\_\_\_

James: What that the same like you, the young women there, do they mostly speak English as well.

Simone: No, I think we talked a lot of French, most of us. There was one that wasn’t supposed to have any children and she got pregnant. Her sister in law used to work there. She got pregnant and she was going to have twins. When she had the twins, the twins died..one of the twins died. Her sister in law took care of the baby while her husband, the one’s husband that died. She used to get up a 5 in the morning to watch the small ones, one of them because I was the one they had for two weeks, never found somebody else.....I did that, they woke me up at 5 and I was just sit there. They never woke up, it was just in case they needed me. The nuns had to go pray then. My sister used too, she had to go pray. They prayed a lot.

James: Were you expected, and the other young women, were you expected to go to church and things with the nuns to go to mass?

Simone: Well, they had a chapel in the orphanage. That is where we went.

James: But you didn’t follow the same schedule as the nuns did?

Simone: No. My sister, her room was near the big boys...right at the end. She bought me there one time. She watched them.

James: So you were sleeping in a different part of the building?

Simone: Yes, it was on the second floor. We washed the windows on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor and we were 2, one would hold on to my legs, than the next time I would hold her legs while we washed the outside.

James: Oh wow.

Simone: It was scary.

James: I bet. : Did you ever work in the kitchen?

Simone: yes, at Don Bosco. When then nun was there, I did not play. I never liked her and I was supposed to have someone work with me. Well, come to find out, all she could do is sit down and peel carrots or whatever. I had to do all the rest, even wash dishtowels, cause during the week we used a lot and we only washed once a week. I had to hang them up. They put new carpets down and I had to take the glue off and I worked hard. It's a hard job.

James: So tell me a little bit about Don Bosco Camp. Did all the kids from the orphanage go there?

Simone: yes, yup and we had a camp down below for all the workers, for all girls anyway, all women. The maintenance man and his wife and kids had a different camp. When Elvis Presley came out, there was a woman that slept in my room, she went to see him. She said that he moved like this and that and they wouldn't let me go.

James: The nuns wouldn't let me go?

Simone: No. So when we were at Don Bosco Camp one night, he saw that it was playing, he bought me with him and I saw it.

James: Are you taking about the maintenance guy?

Simone: Yes

James: What was his name?

Simone: Bergeron, I can't remember his first name.

James: Were there a lot of things like that where the nuns were kind of strict or said there were things you couldn't do?

Simone: No, that was the only thing.

James: There weren't lots of other rules about how you had to behave or anything like that?

Simone: We didn't have time to misbehave but we had to be in at 9....cause if we didn't go in at 9, we had to sleep outside. They would lock the doors. At the end my sister was too sick to teach and she opened the door for me a couple of times...I remember that, when I went to visit her some times.

James: What kind of the things did the boys do at camp?

Simone: Well, they went shopping and they went to church. The maintenance man took them out to a lot of places.

James: Is it the boys that were at the asylum?

Simone: Yah, yah. My brothers remember me taking \_\_\_\_\_ to the store and buying something. They remember that. My youngest brother Brice, types a letter every Christmas and he remembered that and he was only 2 years old.

James: What about when you were at Camp Don Bosco, were there sports, did they do swimming or anything like that?

Simone: yah, swimming that I remember. When the 2 to 6 year olds were in the water we could go in...but the 6 to 12 year we couldn't. So in between, I'd go get wet and I'd have an hour off and I'd sunbath. Six to 12 we couldn't go in the water for it was very strict.

James: What about the orphanage, did the boys spend most of their time at school?

Simone: Yah, I think they did. I don't know what they did at recess. At recess I'd go out if I was off, I'd go out and talk to my sister. She is the one that had to watch the kids outside. It was cold but they dressed warm then but now they don't dress like that. They dress like this. My sister doesn't wear this cause it hurt her ears and she was the first person they let her without wearing that. She was the first...she has to wear a light tan and tan skirt \_\_\_\_\_.

James: So back then they were wearing the full habit.

Simone: Yah.

James: How would you describe your time at the Healey Asylum, did you enjoy it?

Simone: Yah, I enjoyed it but I was tired. I enjoyed it. But the woman in my room, she came from Pownal..and I guess she was sent to her room, \_\_\_\_\_, you know her monthly came, oh, she was awful. I was scared, I was scared really. Then there was this woman, she was married and she got pregnant and her husband beat her. So she came and stayed with us for a while. She had a miscarriage and then she left. The nuns took her in and I went with her one night to see her mother. She gave me a pair of shoes, I remember that. I had to take those, nice mother though, but she didn't have room for her.

James: So you were only there for a year is that what you said?

Simone: Yah..

James: So why did you leave?

Simone: I went back to school.

James: You wanted to go back to school, is that why you decided to leave?

Simone: Yah,, and I picked the wrong time. Cause that was potato harvest, I should have waited another month cause there would have been no work.

James: So when you went back you had to go back to harvesting potatoes.

Simone: Haying \_\_\_\_\_ We had all kinds of animals, sheep, pigs, cows..we never went hungry.

James: Did you ever think about becoming a sister?

Simone: No, but my aunt was sure I was going to be one. One of my aunts says, she is quiet, she is going to be a nun. She was wrong.

James: What made you decide not to?

Simone: I never thought of being a nun. Well, I remember when I was 7, my sister came and after that she took her vows. I have something in my heart that is caused by high fever. I remember they went to church and I was sick. I passed out in the hall and I don't remember much for two weeks. My sister was gone by the time I was okay. I had that high fever. I didn't die, my mother knew what to do. My younger brother below me, we had culverts, one day he fell in there and there was a lot of water. He was going to go in. I told my father and he ran and he was almost dead. We had a wood stove, my mother wrapped him up in a blanket and put him near it for a while. She took him out and rubbed him again, then put him back for a while. They knew what to do. A lot of things old people, like if you burn yourself, put toothpaste and it will stop the burn and it won't bubble. My husband says, no no, I said try it. One time he burned himself. Boy, it works! It does....a lot of things. I had had a friend that lived in Lisbon before, \_\_\_\_\_, she told me that. It worked. I told a lot of people there. There was one of the girls I worked with burned herself on the 4 wheeler, big big burn, didn't have his car. She said you should have told me that before I burned myself.

James: After you left the Healey Asylum, did you ever go back to visit your sister while she was there?

Simone: Yah, I did. That wasn't at the orphanage, that was a house they lived in. They had couches and chairs. They pulled them out and if you had company, they would pull them out and you would sleep on them, but I never slept there. We went to visit, we ate there.

James: Did you sister have other duties about them working at the orphanage?

Simone: She was a teacher, then she watched the kids. I don't know what she did while I worked. She prayed, I know that other than that, I don't know. School, that was a long day....then they had to put everybody's clothes, they had little squares, the numbers. Everybody had a number, would put the clothes in there. If the socks were torn, we had a thing like a light bulb, only it was made out of wood.

James: What was it made out of wood?

Simone: It looked like a light bulb...you would put the sock on there and you sewed the socks. I tried that at home and it didn't work. My husband said, throw those away. They had nuns...I remember the first year I was there, big, big, Christmas tree and I had to decorate that. I started on the top all the way down to the bottom. After that I didn't want to decorate a Christmas tree. My husband did it, I didn't want to. I don't know, I just....I did a good job though.

James: Did they do anything else special at Christmas time there?

Simone: Oh yah they had a lot of gifts from people, even treated the workers.

James: Were these gifts given by charitable groups?

Simone: Yah, yah.

James: Do you remember the Marchand De Bonneur, did they come to visit?

Simone: I don't know.

James: Did you ever get any outside groups coming to visit the children or anything like that?

Simone: None that I remember.

James: What about at other times of the year, did they do anything special at Easter time or the New years or something like that?

Simone: Some of them, if someone would come and get them, they would eat at there house.

James: but nothing at the orphanage, nothing like Christmas.

Simone: No, not that I remember. We stayed there, we opened the gifts. We seemed happy.

James: So you think most of the children who were there seemed to have a good time?

Simone: Yah, yah \_\_\_\_\_

James: Is there anything else that you remember, any other stories, or anything else \_\_\_\_\_?

Simone: Well, I remember a girl that used to work at Don Bosco. One day she was coming up, like I said our camp near the water...dining room was up there, she was coming up and they thought it was me. She looked a lot like me. I remember that. The used to make \_\_\_\_\_ and that is so good. I had the receipt and I lost it. I used to make it all the time. I would make some and put it on cake, but that one I wouldn't could it as long as fudge and I would put it on a cake and my kids loved it.

James: What made that different from regular fudge?

Simone: I don't know, it's brown sugar and \_\_\_\_\_. They would bring us big plates for \_\_\_\_\_.

James: Do you remember any other kind of special food or different food they used to make there?

Simone: Yeah, well they bought lobsters once in a while for the nuns and that is the first time I tasted it. I got a bite and that's it. That's all. We made root beer.

James: You made root beer?

Simone: Yeah, put it down cellar for a while to ferment for a while.

James: How did you used to make that, do you remember?

Simone: They had directions, I can't remember how. I know I made some but I had the receipt.

James: Anything else, any other receipts, any other food that you remember?

Simone: I know I never liked ravioli, I never ate that. When that was served, they had a little store at Don Bosco and I would eat potato sticks. I never liked ravioli and I still don't. Other than that they had soups and they were very good. In the kitchen, I cooked, well I prepared foods and I had forks and pans like that. That was hard and heavy. We would peel potatoes, they had a machine and all you had to do was take the eyes out with a knife and we would peel four pails of that. They had a big walk in freezer/fridge and that is where they put them.

James: So those pails are like four feet high or something like that?

Simone: Yeah, stainless steel. They were heavy.

James: Yeah, I bet, a lot of potatoes.

Simone: Yeah, and the toaster...it went around. There was two toasts, you had to take two out and put two in, and peanut butter every morning. I had to fill a jar of peanut butter on every table. For years I did not like peanut butter, cause I smelled it so much. Now I eat it once in a while with gram crackers. \_\_\_\_\_so I got to eat what there is, put something in your stomach.

James: Anything else you remember or anything else you want to tell me about the asylum?

Simone: Not really, just that it got sold, was Intown Manner for a while, now it's apartments.

James: Do you know why they sold it?

Simone: Well, there is no more nuns, I guess. Cause the last time my father came up, my sister came, I stayed home. I can't remember the reason, I know my friend went with them and I stayed home. My father never went anywhere but he would come up there to see my sister.. He never got married again, never did. He dated and he was 97 when he died.

James: Do you think that living in CT., then living here in Lewiston and moving around, that sort of thing, did that have anything effect on the relationship with you father, the way you and your father got along?

Simone: Oh no.

James: You had a pretty good relationship with him?

Simone: No, my father was mean man. My mother was nice but he wasn't. That is why I said when I was 5 \_\_\_\_\_ I was lonely in that place and he knew that. Yup, we had a \_\_\_\_\_ for one room and the socks, potato socks used to bunch up and they would always have me untie them. He knew I \_\_\_\_\_. One time I was seven and I was tired, so I jumped off the back of the truck, we had boats, and I ran home and told my mother, "I'm tired." She said, "Stay home." My father never forgot that. Two years later my mother was pregnant every year. She never lost weight so they had corsets and they went in the dining room and I was looking, you know, looking around at the neighbors and he came and kicked me \_\_\_\_\_, now I'm \_\_\_\_\_ over here. He was very mean and then I never told my mother that. That is probably why I got married so young too. \_\_\_\_\_ different part of her. Another thing, my father was Catholic and my mother was Protestant and they got married. My grandmother never liked her.

James: That is your...?

Simone: cause that wasn't heard of.

James: Which grandmother was that, your mother or father's?

Simone: My mother's mother, because we didn't have \_\_\_\_\_ or anything, we didn't even have water in the house. Every night we go, after picking potatoes we were dirty, we would go to her house...she would let my mother in but she would not let my father in and us either. We had to go in the lake. The day before my mother died, she lived on Main Street in a nursing home, and she yelled out, your mother is not going to live, she is going to die! like that. I cried, we used to pray when we went in, I cried \_\_\_\_\_. That was pretty \_\_\_\_\_. My other grandmother, she died after I was born.

James: So you didn't really know her?

Simone: No, I didn't. No, my grandfather married again and we weren't allowed in the house either. \_\_\_\_\_.

James: So as a child were you raised as a Catholic?

Simone: Yes, we went to church every Sunday. We had to wear hats, which I hated. Now there is no hat.

James: Are you still a practicing Catholic today?

Simone: Yah, they come and give us Holy Communion every Sunday, here.

James: Okay, I think that is all the questions that I have unless there is anything that you think you would like to add today?

Simone: No, that is about it.

James: Okay, well great, thank you for talking to me. I really appreciate it.

Simone: You're welcome.