



**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
“MERRIMACK MILLS”**

INFORMANT: Ruth Anne Sharpe
b. May 3, 1911 d. Jan. 5, 2003

INTERVIEWER: Mary Rose Lane

DATE: April 14, 1994

R=Ruth
M=Mary Rose

Interview begins with a testing of the recording sound:

M: And this is Mary Rose Lane talking with Ruth Anne Sharpe, or Annie Sharpe, as she's like, like to be known I guess. And the date is April 15th. And we're at, are at Annie's residence on Gorham Street.

Maybe you could uh, just tell me a little about where you were born, and how you came to Lowell?

R: I was born in Macon, Georgia on Hilltop Avenue. And um, I came to Lowell as a soldier's wife. And I always wanted to be a missionary. And I went to uh, a private school that was run by the Baptist, organization from [here?] around. And um, the teachers was of different culture. And in that way if you wanted to be a missionary you learned a different language. You learned how people lived. Their nature, they cook the food, all things like that. And then um, I took a lot of, quite a bit of medical training, which was necessary if you went as a missionary, because there were very few doctors. And there was talk of a war, and nobody knew just what was going to happen. And the medical, you would always need it and use it. So I went to [Robinsville?], and then I worked in a public hospital. And uh, the school was [Ballot Normal?], and they coincide with Hudson High after fashion. But during that time they were separate. And uh, I met my husband, and he was stationed in Camp [VanDon], and Camp Wheeler, Georgia at least, and then the Camp VanDon. And then from Camp VanDon we went to Paris, Tennessee, where he took his flight training jumping off in the mountains. And it was interesting, because the people there lived up in there and they didn't know who the president was for years, and years. They were very unique. And it was so hot the water tasted like rotten eggs.

So anyway uh, I moved down to Nashville, Tennessee and lived on Cedar Street. And

uh, from there I worked for the City Hospital there and got more training, which was cheaper, and I didn't have to pay for it. They only gave you two dollars a week there. But anyway, it was something that helped. And then I worked at Mississippi at that City Hospital to get more training. And I did volunteer work, you know, learning to be a missionary. And from there I uh, was transferred, my husband was transferred to Camp Edwards for his overseas training in the water, going in you know, in boats and things. And then um, Fort Devens he went to stay. And uh, from there I migrated here, and I had finished school. I went back in , in June of '43 to finish, get my graduate papers. And I graduated from Ballot Normal High at that time. And then I stayed here. And after I was refused from England to be a missionary, because of bronchial asthma, and I stayed here and did missionary work here from different hospitals. And then I worked in the mills. And uh, the Merrimack Mill was my first job. And it was unique, and I liked it. And uh,

I
worked in the section what they made uh, khaki material. The material for khaki uniforms. It was white, and then you know, they dyed it afterwards. They had a dye house. And then um, after the mills closed, well we all went to work one morning and they said, "no more!" The guard at the gate says, "no more work." We was all devastated, very upset about it. So what could we do, you know? So um, anyway we went home and stopped at Andy Roache's where we all, the mill rats went. And uh, we stayed there and talked and discussed it, but they never put the mill back up and they never gave anymore uh, answers about what was going to be done about it. And then the next thing we know, they had torn it down, and that's where the bank used to be, the Union National Bank. Part of the Lowell High School is on some of it, and Arcand Drive is on the other, where the peoples used to live when they had the mills, all the way up to the Masonic Hall on Dutton Street here. So really everybody, it just took you for a loop because with this, at least we could get a little something to pay our rent from one mill to the other. But now you can't. And I remember paying \$2.50 a week rent. And now the rent you can't even imagine what it was like. And in fact there wasn't too many

homeless
people at that time, because you could always do something, or pick up some rags, or old aluminum and go down to, on Tanner Street and sell it. But now you can't, you know? You can't get enough to really survive. And that's just about the size of it, you know? And nobody wanted the mills to go. And next, little by little, the mills went and I went into the shoe factory and I worked for uh, the Lowell Shoe. And then after the Lowell Shoe would get out of work, I went to the Sherman Shoe as a top dresser. And I stayed there until they closed in 1962. And then from there I went to the Malden Mills, and I worked in the Malden Mills for two years on the weaver. The machines that you had, it looked like um, a spider. It had different colors like the, you know, different threads that went through together to make a piece of material. It would be more like a tweed. And uh, I worked there for about three years. And then the work gave out, and then I went to ITT, International Telephone and Telegraph. And I retired from there.

M: So, I'm trying to get the chronology straight. You came to Lowell in 1943.

R: Three. 1943.

M: And your first, your first job was doing (--)

R: Was at working in the Merrimack Mills.

M: That was your first job.

M: Yeah, at night from uh, in the afternoon from two to eleven at night. And uh, that was my first job. And I lived at Keegan's on Bridge Street there, right across from Andy Roache's. It used to be Andy Roache's. And I, on the corner, other corner of the street was uh, Danas'. Danas, the Danas Brothers had the fruit and vegetable store. And then there was the Danas right here on Gorham Street. And that's where we used to come and get a lot of little coffee, lunches, and things from the mills after we got out of work. And then some of them like a little beer. So we'd stop at Andy Roache's, and we would stop there and gab, until time to go home. And that was my first job, it was there. And it was very nice, it was good. It was hard because it wasn't, the people wasn't used to Negroes in this area. And it was a little hard, but um, I put up with insults and everything. And it didn't bother me, because my mother always said, "I named you and whatever else anyone else calls you, forget it." So she named me Annie Ruth. Some of them call me Ruth Annie, and some call me Annie Ruth. So that's what I answer to any insults. As long as I didn't make any trouble for the rest of them, I got along with them very well. But it was a hard job, you know, to put up with. But um, anyway the boss got so that he knew that they didn't like them, you know, Negroes and things like that. And he uh, you know, he played a good part in watching. And then after that they trusted me, and I've been working here every since.

M: Who, who were the people that gave you a hard time?

R: Some of the French people gave me you know, the hard time, because they felt that um, (--). One of the girls told me afterwards, they felt that they came down from Canada, or different places to get a job, and maybe some of them didn't have their papers to stay, and they'd only come through and they feel, felt that I would take their job away from them. But after they found out that I wasn't that way, they became friends. And I used to go up on Ford Street and Suffolk Street, all in the Acre part. And uh, we'd have a good time after they learned that I wasn't there to take their job, I was just there for a living. And we got along fine after that. Yup.

M: And were you really the only Black person?

R: Yes, I was the only Black girl working there. Only the Black person in the whole building, and when I first came here, yeah. And in fact I tell you, there was about five families of Negroes here. It was the Skanes, the Finnigans, the um, let's see. Madelyn Edwards, Garfield White. Um, let's see. There was a guy name George, Jesse Sharpe, or George Sharpe, he had one leg. And uh, there wasn't very many Negroes here. And then there was some, some Negroes that was in the Franco American School, you know. That um, that the parents they had brought them there and left them, you know. And the parents, they were mixed culture and they didn't want them. So they used, they would

left, left them at the Franco American School for a long time. But then some of them left after they got a certain age, old enough to leave. And other than that there was no Negroes. And then after the 3, 6th, the 6th Infantry came in, well then a few more Negroes migrated in. Some stayed and some left. I guess there was around twenty or twenty-five of us that stayed, stayed in Lowell. Bought homes and we all, they died here, you know. And I guess it's just three more families out of the twenty that's left that worked with me there. And uh, then I, in the shoe factory they worked with me, but I was the only one in the Merrimack Mill. Yeah. Which turned out to be very good and interesting after awhile, you know? I liked it. It didn't bother me.

M: Were you, were you scared to come north because of that? Maybe afraid of that idea that maybe people would give you a hard time? Did you think about that before you came?

R: No I didn't. I didn't think of it, because I always had a religious background. And I felt that God was with me. If the Supreme Being, whatever, he, he always guided me, because my mother died when I was twelve. And my father was, I was ten and a half when he passed away. So I was pretty much on my own. And I had to live with a sister. And uh, my mother told me she wasn't going to live to see me get grown, but she always said, nobody gives you nothing for nothing. And everything that you get, you're going to have to work for. And with that attitude now, I still maintain it. That uh, if someone come, if something comes easy it's no good. You have to work for it. And when you work for it then you enjoy it and you know it's yours. And you don't have to do something dirty or sneaky to pay them back, you know? So I still maintain that type of life now. And uh, I wasn't afraid, it was just that I knew that one way or the other I'd make it and survive. That's [comment unclear]. And then I know, knew that working at the mill and doing a little volunteer work, doing it you know, at the time like the Old Ferris Hospital used to be here. And some of the older people that was here, they'd go there because they had no money to go to Saint John's, or Saint Joe's, or Lowell General. So I'd go out and volunteer and help them shave the men, you know. In the hospital they teach you how to shave men and do things to uh, make them comfortable in case someone, they had no family. So with this I used to go out and help them. And then Shaw Hospital, volunteered there. And I still go to nursing homes and things, to see and help do whatever I can to help out and make it a little bit easier.

But uh, I don't think I ever had a frayed bone in me, but thinking back, and looking back after I've gotten older, you wonder how, I wonder how I survived the trend, you know. And how I didn't, I never drank and I never smoked. So I always tried to keep a level head and an opened mind to a lot of things, you know? So that way it carried me through so far. Yup.

M: What? Why did you go to the Merrimack? Was it you just happened to hear about an opening there?

R: Well they had, Mrs. Keegan, she uh, was a, she had something like a milk leg. And, and I liked her because she was very nice to me. And I, my mother always had a saying that if you, someone help you along the way do something nice for them. So she was

wanting, trying to go to the store one day, and you had to go up and down the stairs. And I said to her, I says “why don’t you let me go to the store for you? Where do you have to go?” So she says, “the tea room.” The Irish Tea store there, in the back of the Union Bank where the parking lot is now? It used to be uh, a ski, a guy had it, all the stuff from Ireland. Like Irish linen, the tea, the coffee. Everything that you (--) It had savory foods and coffee and stuff that came in from Ireland. He had that store there. And I would go there and get her tea, you know, the Irish tea. And uh, I uh, met a lady in there. And she says, “you know they’re hiring down at the Merrimack Mill.” And it was no, I didn’t like the idea of having to sit around. I was always the nervous worker. I, and I didn’t like sitting around. So it wasn’t anything, no sewing machines you could get, because it was during the war. And you couldn’t ride a car. The gas was rationed. The food was rationed. The shoes were rationed. So what could you really do with yourself, you know?

But then we used to go lay in Lucy Larcom Park and have a good time there throwing peanut shells in the water. So anyway, one of the guys came back and his name was Ben. He lived in Centraville. And he says, “why don’t you come and work for me?” So I says, “I don’t know if they’d hire me, I don’t know what to do.” So he says, “come in, I’m a loom fixer and I know what to do, and I’ll show you.” So I says “okay.” So I went in as a battery girl. The next day I went in and signed up, and the next day I had a job. And I worked there ever since until they closed down. Yeah!

M: The first job was as a battery girl?

R: As a battery girl, yeah.

M: And that was replacing them in (--)

R: Putting the batteries in and wind them around. And then sometimes the thread would break, the battery would break. It will be a little malfunction in the material, in the thread. You just had to make a weavers knot and start it up again for the ladies, because they usually give the, the women or the man, whoever was on, was making, they’d give them five or six machines. And in order to keep the machines going, they’d ask the battery girls to uh, do a weavers knot and start them up. So they, they would, the material wouldn’t go down. And they would go faster, do more work. You know. So that’s what we did. And I, I never went on the looms to work. I just was the battery girl, and that’s it. Yeah.

M: What kind of cloth was that?

R: We, we made (--) You know the uniforms, the khak, we call it khaki, the khaki uniforms that they had for the summer, and in the winter for the uh (--) It was summer clothes for the Air Force. The Air Force is a little greenish, a little different color. And the Army guys, Infantry, there was like a gold, a yellow. You know, not a really um, a brown/green color like. We used to make that material for them. And that’s what they would do. They’d send it to um, they send it to the factory if they have, they make the uniforms for the soldiers. Yeah. And uh, then you know, we only, only if you didn’t

happen to work there that you worked in the corduroy, the velveteen section of it. And that was on the right hand side, left hand side when you come in the gate. And the right hand side over there near the dye house when you come in to the building. Yup.

M: So after you were a battery girl, then did you move on to a different job?

R: No, they didn't give us no job, no different job in where they closed down on us.

M: So that was, you had mentioned that you worked in dying, or khaking.

R: I worked in the velveteen section. That was to, where they made velvet material. I worked in there. It's the same thing. It's the same job, filling the batteries and things for the guys that was doing the velveteen work. And in the dye house they usually dyed it dark. And I couldn't stand the smell of the dye. So they moved me out back to the material. And I worked there until they closed down. Yup.

M: So you primarily worked as a battery.

R: The battery girl, yeah.

M: And you worked at one point on the khaki type (R: oh yeah) and then later on (--)

R: The velveteen.

M: Worked in the velveteen.

R: Yeah, umhm. Then that was near the dye house. They had a dye house that dyed the different colors of material before they sent it out. It's on a big iron bolt before they'd send it out to the factory to be made into clothing. And then after that, you know, that was primarily their job. But I never worked in the doffing department where this was. It was, [phone is ringing] it was a lot of uh (--)

[Tape is turned off so that Ruth can answer the phone]

R: They had the mist to settle the cotton. And uh, after awhile it gives you, the sound of it made you deaf. And uh, the doctor told me that I will never hear soft talk again, but not to operate on it, there was nothing they could do about it. But nowadays they have something to put in your ear that you don't have to hear noise, and it don't bother your ears anymore, like it did then during those times. Yeah!

M: Was it really loud? Can you remember it?

R: Yeah, they were. They were clickclacking. They were really loud, yeah. But now they're not as loud as they used to be. And Mrs. Keegan used to have uh, the mill girls live with her also. And they'd migrate in with the soldiers wives. They came in galore. And they worked at the mills too, some of the girls that lived there. Yeah.

M: What were some of the buildings, like you worked in the cotton producing, then you said you worked in the velveteen in another building. (R: Yeah) What were, what were the buildings like? Were they clean, or dirty, or (--)

R: Um, they, they wasn't too bad. Only except [unclear] some of the machines had oil, you know, where the machinery would go round and round. Some of them was on oil. But they mostly kept them clean, because the material was, it came out pretty clean. It wasn't too bad, but uh, it was just that the rats came after awhile. And uh, a lot of the peoples had bubonic plague from you know, the rats, the water rats would come in and eat the food, or whatever, from the bins of what, if you left anything. So then uh, I don't know. We didn't know whether they came in through the cotton, or they came from the canal. But um, that's why they used to call them mill, call us mill rats. Yeah, because the rats gave blubonic plague, or bubonic plague to a lot of the people had it. Yeah, from fooling around with them. Like now they have shots and things you give them, but during that time they didn't know too much about that, you know? But um, it conquered it after awhile. Yeah.

M: Did you see them a lot around?

R: Oh there used to be a lot of rats. They were big! And they'd grow huge, you know? But you couldn't catch them. They, some of the said they looked like possums. They were big. [Laughing] They were huge, yeah. I'm telling you. But then after awhile it got all right. But I, I still don't know today why the Merrimack closed. They never said a work. Just went that one morning and they said "no more work!" The mill is closed down. And the next thing we know they were tearing down the houses, you know, where the peoples lived along Dutton Street all the way up to, as I said, up to the Masonic Hall. Those was live-in houses. And then they let the peoples live in there for awhile, and then all of a sudden the people that owned the property must have sold it to someone. And that's how it become to be all torn down. And the bank is there, and there's a school as I said before. Yeah.

M: Those people who were living there, they (--)

R: They had to go. They had to go, yeah. They had to move out. I don't know where they placed them, but, because I was working in the shoe factory at that time on Jackson Street. And then I bought my home on [Kingston?] Street. And I worked there until 1962 as I said, when the mills closed, uh the Shoe Factory was closed down completely. Yeah. It was no more.

M: So there wasn't much of a sign before you showed up that one day? You worked there from '43 to what was it?

R: Oh, I worked there for about, until they closed down. I guess it was in the 50's they closed down. Yeah.

M: And did things change over time, or?

R: No, they never, they never, they never said anything about they were closing. Usually we'd always ask the maintainers, you know, the loom fixers if, what was going on. If we saw something strange. But they never said anything, you know? And they never acted as if they knew it was going to close. And in fact some of the loom fixers, fixers were there with their, they had their tools you know, in like a black strap, or gunny sack like, you know? And a lot of them, they was there with their tools to go to work. John Kater, Millie Kater. Uh, she worked in the looms too, like me. Next to me. And uh, he was a loom fixer, and a doffer. But uh, none of us knew what was going on. And uh, all of a sudden that morning we went, went there to work and uh, it was not, the place was closed down and the guard wouldn't let us through the gate. And we was all standing around looking. And to this day we really don't know what happened. All we know is that they said they'd send us the check in the mail, and that was it. Yeah. So we wondered. I still wonder today what happened. All of us do really. We talk about that now at the Salvation Army, the Senior Companion Program, Senior Programs they have called SAGE. We talk about that now, wondering what happened to them, you know? So that's the size of that. Yeah. And the school is there. Yeah.

M: Do you remember the Grist Mills at all?

R: Oh yeah, the grist mill is there. Arnold's Grist Mills. We used to go there too a lot. And in fact I think it's near Shrewsbury. Uh, they're still running. We go there a lot. And they have the Republicans, buildings that Republicans own one side, and Democrats on the other. The benches are still there. And the lady that wrote "Mary Had a Little Lamb", the one room school house", it's still there too. Yeah, I remember those. Yeah. All those things. All those, all those things. And I remember where in the middle up there where the City Hall is, where Dummer Street go down one side, and the other little street come around, that used to be a horse hitching block for the horses. It used to be a round thing there. Everybody come in to town they'd have, they'd hitch their horses. And then they had one of those [Lillypod?] things that used to go around and pick up when the horses went by. [Laughs] And then the cars came into focus after the war, and everything began to change after that, 1945 when the war was over. Peoples got their food back, and the stamps and the shoes, and everything. And it was altogether different. It was more (--), but still and yet you had something to do, and some place to go. And uh, where Brigham's is now, used to be a Penny Arcade. But um, that all went. There's nothing to entertain the poor people now anyway, that have one or two children. And then where the Wang Lab Center is, the Wang Center for Art and you know, things, that used to be a place where the radio station used to be there. And we'd go to skate at the Rex. We'd go skating there. And then they had an eating place on the other side. And they had boxing there. And it used to be lady wrestlers there when we'd go. They were worse than men. They were terrible. But uh, we used, it was a lot of [unclear]. Crystal Lake, Lakeview used to be there with the carousel and things. Nothing but condos there now. This is what happened. It don't, Lowell really don't have much entertainment unless you dig deep in your pocket. And a person who don't have much money, and have two or three children, really can't afford it. You know? So I don't know if it's

good or bad that things went up. You get a little bit more money, or you, during the times when we come along, but there wasn't as much, and as many crimes and things as there is now, you know? People got along a little bit better too, you know? So you can't really judge which is good and which is bad, but we did have a good time. There was nice places to go. There was a lot of movies to go to. But I suppose everything migrating into the home was [unclear], yet is isn't um, it isn't getting out into the world to see different things, like the movies, going to a movie, but just sitting at home, really. So um, we had more of a mixture than, than it is now. And I enjoyed it. We had a good time. Yeah.

M: So um, we, you said the "Mill Rats". (R: Yeah) Primarily a group of women that you were friends with, or was it men, or?

R: We were friendly, the women and the men, they were all friendly together. And I have an old fashion way, I, I like to be friends with the guys, and I like to be friends with the ladies. But um, in fact in my family we never, well we never had a sex problem. I, even now I, if I'm friendly with a man, or something, it's just friendship, you know? And uh, we were all friends and we got along. And I'm, really the group that I went around with, I don't think any of us ever thought about it going with, no going with anybody else's husband. So we used to go the dances. The Laurier Club on Merrimack Street. We lived, leave the mill sometime at night, and go to, bring our clothes and go to the Laurier Club. And we'd dance with other woman's husbands, but it was, it was never that idea of sex or anything, you know? And I got along with the girls. And they trusted me, and I trusted them, you know? So we danced with one another's husband, and it never came to that that I know of.

But um, even now one of the guards that used to be um, the brothers, they lived on Ford Street, they had an orchestra. And we, one of the boys is still living that played in that orchestra of brothers. Uh, let's see, what was her name? Lorette Underwood, her name is now. But um, I can't think of his name to save my neck, the guys that played in the orchestra that worked at the mill too. Um, let's see, um. Hm, isn't that awful to pass that name down. It was a group of them, and I empowered her record also to play. She lived with the mill now. They lived at the Merrimack, at the mill down on Market Street. Market Mills. Um, isn't that awful. But anyway, we, they made quite a few records, you know, and we'd all go dancing. That was really my bag, dancing. I really liked to dance, and I still do, but I can't get around anymore. And um, hm. Isn't that awful, huh?

M: It's bugging you, huh?

R: Yes it is. She live on Ford, they lived on Ford Street. And I, I remember Lorette, she's still the secretary of the [unclear]. And uh, if I can remember her mother's first name I could remember the last of it. Isn't that awful. Well it skipped by me. And I suppose after you go out I'll remember it.

M: That's all right.

R: Anyway the brothers, they had [unclear], we all used to go and enjoy it. And then I lived here after I left from down on Bridge Street. I lived on Summer Street for quite a few years with Rex Henry. His wife came here from Texas and they had a rooming house on the corner of Davis and Summer Street. And then they put the project up. And those, the homes around here went. And they built Bishop Markham at this space in '57, '50 something. In the 50's anyway, all the homes went. Yeah. But um, and most of the people (--)

SIDE I ENDS
SIDE II BLANK