

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

“HOME IS WHERE I MAKE IT”  
INTERVIEW

JUNE 4, 2003

**In Attendance:**

Interviewer: Maureen Elgersman Lee

Interviewee: Joanna Boley-Lee

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[Joanna Boley-Lee, TAPE 1, SIDE A]

Maureen: Today is Wednesday, June the 4th, and this is the "Home Is Where I Make It" Race and Labor in Lewiston and Auburn, Maine Oral History Project. And today I am interviewing Ms. Joanna Boley-Lee. Joanna, first of all thank you for agreeing to be part of the project.

Ms. Boley-Lee: Mmm hmm.

Maureen: I have three sets of questions, um, to ask you, one concerns your background, second speaks to the issue of labor, and the third speaks to life in Lewiston and Auburn. So my first question is, in what year were you born?

Ms. Boley-Lee: 1937.

Maureen: And where were you born?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Newark, New Jersey.

Maureen: And how long have you lived in Maine?

Ms. Boley-Lee: I've been in Maine for eight and a half years.

Maureen: And you live in Lewiston or Auburn?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Lewiston.

Maureen: So what brought you to --

Ms. Boley-Lee: I came here to -- to work for Bates College as Director of Affirmative Action.

Maureen: Can you tell me your parents' names?

Ms. Boley-Lee: My mother is Dorcas Ann Jennings Boley and my father is Joseph David Boley.

Maureen: Can you spell your mother's first name?

Ms. Boley-Lee: D O R C A S.

Maureen: And can you tell me a little something about your parents?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Um, my mother was a musician. Um, she, ah -- also paint. In her later years, she became a painter. Um, my father was a printer and, um, a lithographer, also, did a lot of art work, mostly drawing. And he was a singer as well. He considered himself as such.

Maureen: Okay. Where were your parents born?

Ms. Boley-Lee: My mother was born in Brockton, Massachusetts and my father was born in Ithaca, New York.

Maureen: And where did you go to elementary school?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Um, I grew up in -- did all my schooling in Montclair, New Jersey.

Maureen: Okay. And your -- the particular school, your elementary school, your high school?

Ms. Boley-Lee: My elementary school was Rand School, grade-level school. And my high school was Montclair High.

Maureen: And did you go on to college or university?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Yes, I did.

Maureen: Can you tell me what institutions you attended?

Ms. Boley-Lee: I started my career at Morgan State College, a historically black college. Um, and --

Maureen: And where is that?

Ms. Boley-Lee: In Baltimore, Maryland.

Maureen: Okay.

Ms. Boley-Lee: And graduated from California College of Art in Oakland, California.

Maureen: And can you give me the year for your graduation?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Uh, you know, I --

Maureen: Roughly.

Ms. Boley-Lee: Roughly. I worked my way through college. So I'm trying to think. I graduated in 1969, I -- '69 or '70.

Maureen: Okay. Alright. And your major?

Ms. Boley-Lee: My major was art education.

Maureen: Did your parents attend college or university?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Yes. My mother went to Coombs College, which is now the Philadelphia College of Art. And my father actually went to a trade school, Bordentown, um, Trade School, where he learned printing.

Maureen: Okay. And do you have any children?

Ms. Boley-Lee: I have one child, a daughter.

Maureen: Okay.

Ms. Boley-Lee: Oh, and I might say -- I -- I'm sorry. I'm out of sequence. But, I --  
I --

Maureen: No (inaudible).

Ms. Boley-Lee: -- I also received my master's degree from Howard University. So I went back to a historically black college.

Maureen: Okay, great. So, your daughter, does she remain in this state, or not so much remain, but -- you are not a native of Maine. Um, is your daughter in the State of Maine?

Ms. Boley-Lee: No, she is not. She lives in Daytona Beach, Florida.

Maureen: And is she a college or university graduate?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Yes, she is. She graduated from Trenton State College in New Jersey.

Maureen: Great. Um, any other information you want to offer about -- just kind of general background?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Um, I would like to say that perhaps my experience over the years, um, living in New Jersey and in California, I think prepared me for the experience that I am having in Lewiston, Maine.

Maureen: Okay. Let's talk about that experience then, before we get to some of those more, uh, specific experiential, uh, questions. Again, some of these questions may be a little bit of repetitive, um, asking things in (inaudible) different ways. But, what type of jobs have you held?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Uh, um, as I mentioned, I worked my way through college. So, I did graphic arts for a, uh, journal with Standard Oil of New Jersey. I worked for Trans World Airlines for a number of years, um, as a flight attendant --

Maureen: Oh, really.

Ms. Boley-Lee: -- and as a ticket agent, and reservations. I did it all. Um, I taught school. Both, um, um, public school and college. And now I'm in my perhaps last career as an affirmative action officer.

Maureen: Okay. At Bates -- can you -- can you talk a little bit about that experience at Bates, in Lewiston, in the type of work that you do? Can you -- can you kind of reflect on that a bit?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Yes. Um, in many ways, it is, uh, easier than when I was working in affirmative action in New Jersey because the, um, tolerance level, I -- I hate to use that word, but I will, is, um, um higher. Uh, the State of Maine, uh, because people are not used to seeing a lot of people of color, they, uh, tend not to do some of the things that we identify as discriminatory, um, because they don't know about that. But, they do things that we can consider insensitive. So most of the work that I've had to do at my institution have been with people not knowing. Examples of that would be, uh, saying "oriental" instead of "Asian", "colored" instead of "African American" or "black". Um, and then, um, uh, most of the work has been with sexual harassment. Again, even with sexual harassment, a lot of it has been being insensitive or not knowing. Terms of endearment, like "dear" and "honey" and "sweetheart" are used frequently, but they are not meant to be offensive. I think as, um -- as people become more aware of what sexual harassment

or race discrimination really means, they begin to try not to use derogatory terms. Uh, as a result of things being, um, not quite as vulnerable, uh, on the campus, I found myself doing work in the community. So, I'm on a lot of committees, hmm, that deal with race and gender. And I'm asked to do training within the schools and -- and different organizations. And, so I represent Bates in doing these kinds of things.

Maureen: Okay. Well, now can you -- can you talk about any of the committees that you -- that you have (inaudible) locally?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Mmm Hmm.

Maureen: (Inaudible)

Ms. Boley-Lee: Uh, I work with the, uh, City of Lewiston. There are two committees, um, both of them are diversity committees, one of them under, uh, Mayor Kaileigh Tara that was the beginning of the diversity committee. And then, um, there's another committee that has -- was put together, amazingly, just before the, um, uh, -- the, um, march in January when the white supremists came. We were trying to set up some workshops for the city to help people to -- to resolve the issues they had with the Somalians being here. And it was perfect timing because we were able to then concentrate our efforts on the, um, rally at Bates. The "Many and One" group, sort of -- many of the people on this, uh, city committee also served on the "Many and One" committee. So, we've worked together. Uh, I

did training for the Lewiston and Auburn Police Department. I serve on the "Hate Bias Taskforce" committee which is, uh, a state committee, but each city has its own small organization that is part of the larger group. Uh, and then the other kinds of committee are the Jubilee Center at Trinity Episcopal Church. Um, not so much for diversity and gender, but here it's class. We -- we work with the -- the, uh, poorer and unemployed people in the city, um, those kinds of things.

Maureen: Now, how would that work differ -- when you -- when you work in class issues, how is that different from the work you do around race and gender?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Actually, there is not a whole lot of difference. I think the reason why there is a lot of class -- more class issues in this area than issues of race have to do with the fact that it's pretty a homogeneous community. And, so, the same kinds of, um, um, derogatory statements, um, the treating people differently, uh, looking down on others comes out based on your status within the community. So, we do find that poor people, poor white people are treated by each other in the same way as people of different races are in more diverse cities.

Maureen: And the "Many and One" rally in January of this year, January 2003, uh, was held at Bates, and your committee worked -- how did it feel (inaudible) -- uh, in -- in the middle -- so to speak, how



did it feel to be working with the city, how did it feel to be working on these committees in the mists of what -- what was some turmoil?

Ms. Boley-Lee:

Well, you know, at first it was kind of frightening because -- and our small committee, we were talking about how do we protect our community from what could happen with the white supremacists coming in. Um, and so we were thinking of workshops and things that we would actually do after the rally was over because the police were going to take care of controlling the environment. And then the "Many and One" committee, which I was not a part of, but that committee started working on having the rally at Bates which was a wonderful thing because it gave people who wanted to do something a positive place to go. So, um, it was almost like two things at one time. What has happened since the rally is that, um, the "Many and One" committee and the committee from the Lewiston government have, more-or-less, come together to begin the dialogue. And so there have been workshops and dialogues and meetings since February. And there is, um -- there is going to be a report that is coming out, they are working on it now, about the outcomes of the various workshops that they have been having. So the two groups have been overlapping after the events.

Maureen: Now, how does -- how do you go from being a flight attendant to being -- working in affirmative action at -- at an institution with, um, Bates kind of stature in the academia?

Ms. Boley-Lee: You know, people ask me how did you do this. So I tell them when I was a flight attendant I was interested in traveling internationally and that's why I did that. Um, when I finished doing that, I worked as an art teacher. All of my work as an art teacher was done with teaching students art forms of other cultures. So if we did print making, our designs were connected with designs from other cultures. We would do, um, um, pieces of art that were directly from those cultures such as weaving that are worn by Guatemalan women and Adinkra cloth which is a cloth in Ghana. So that it was all culturally based. And, ah, so when I went into affirmative action what I did was I put that part of my life together with my years spent in the civil rights movement which, um, really prepared me more for my job than my teaching. But, uh, I believe since affirmative action is moving close to, uh, dealing with diversity, uh, the cultural pieces have been easily transferred into what I do as well.

Maureen: Okay. Now, you raised the civil rights movement. Can you briefly kind of characterize your experience with that?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Mmm hmm. Um, during the '60s, which is probably the reason why I finished school late, uh, I worked, uh, with the civil rights

movement in, uh, California. I worked, uh, mainly with the Breakfast Program with the Black Panther party, um, stood vigil a few nights when we thought the San Francisco Police Department was going to have a shoot-out, um, helped to set up, uh, civil rights, um -- or help prepare when civil rights marchers were going to the south -- I didn't have the money to go with them, but we did some of the leg work -- um, worked on rallies, um, demonstrations that were held in the City of, uh, San Francisco and the State of California. Those kinds of things.

Maureen: Wow.

Ms. Boley-Lee: It was good. It was good.

Maureen: Great. And before I move on to a couple other questions, what do you think has been your greatest success or your greatest impact in terms of the work that you do in Lewiston, and Auburn as well?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Um, I would -- I would say at Bates my greatest success has been two -- that I am proud of. One, working with a group of people who are really marginalized, the dining service people and the maintenance. That's the class issue that I mentioned. Um, helping to get them to feel better about themselves, helping to get our community to see them as viable, uh, productive members of our community. Um, I feel proud of the fact that I've helped Bates diversify their faculty. Um, not as good a job on the staff, uh, but I think we've done a really, really good job on the faculty. Just

reminding them that we are recruiting of color and they are not going to stay if they don't see other people here who are teaching them or working with them who don't look like them. So, I, I'm proud of that. I think with the Lewiston and Auburn area, perhaps the sensitivity building in the community -- the organizations that I have been a part of and, um, getting people to -- my focus, in fact, when I came here, was trying to get white people to begin to talk about race. That's really hard for them to do. It's even hard for some people of color when they are in the minority in a place. But I -- I feel that I've been able to do that with the various groups that I have worked with.

Maureen: Do you know of any prominent blacks who live or have lived in Lewiston or Auburn? And prominent can mean, prominent because of their profession or prominent in terms of popular, personalities, people that, that are very popular in the community. Is there anyone who fits that?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Mmm hmm. Uh, first person that comes to mind for me is John Jenkins. Um, mainly because John is a popular figure in Lewiston. In fact, when I came here, one of the things that I thought, well, Lewiston has a black mayor; it's a white town. They can't be too bad because black people certainly didn't put him in office. Then I got to know John and I realized he is not only popular but he's a person who -- he's a good person. Um, Bates has had many people

in and out of its community, uh, who made a name for themselves while they were here. One woman who is no longer at Bates, Christine -- oh, I forgot her last name. Uh, uh, I'll think of it in a minute. But she was a professor at Bates who -- who just touched the lives of many students, particularly women students. And she was able to empower these women to be the best that they can be. So I would certainly say, -- Christina Brinkley is her name.

Maureen: Brinkley.

Ms. Boley-Lee: Yes.

Maureen: What was her discipline?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Sociology, mmm hmm. She was a mammographer and, um, um, women's studies was also another discipline.

Maureen: Do you know of any black-owned businesses in Lewiston or Auburn?

Ms. Boley-Lee: I -- I know of -- of a business that I have -- believe is black owned. I have not met the owner and it is on Lisbon -- Sabbatus and College Streets. It's a store. Um, I understand that is owned by a black man. And then there is a cigarette/cigar shop on Main Street that I've been told is owned by a black man. And one that closed, um -- I don't know if you were here, Maureen, when the chicken -- there was a place -- chicken -- there was a chicken shop on -- on, um, Center Street in Auburn not far from the bridge. The best chicken. Oh, it was wonderful. And --

Maureen: And -- like fried chicken like a restaurant --

Ms. Boley-Lee: It was actually roasted.

Maureen: Okay.

Ms. Boley-Lee: It was fabulous. And what happened was a black man owned that place. When he left here, he sold his business and he sold the recipe and -- to a white man, and he had the business for years. Now he has since sold the business. And, in fact, I think, the building is torn down and there is a Pizza Hut there now.

Maureen: (Inaudible) Okay.

Ms. Boley-Lee: Yeah. Yeah.

Maureen: It's not the -- is it the Broasted Chicken?

Ms. Boley-Lee: The Broasted Chicken. That's it.

Maureen: Yes.

Ms. Boley-Lee: Did you have it?

Maureen: I've had it. I've had it.

Ms. Boley-Lee: It's wonderful. Yeah.

Maureen: Yes.

Ms. Boley-Lee: That was a regular stop of mine.

Maureen: Great.

Ms. Boley-Lee: But those are the only black businesses that I -- I am aware of.

Maureen: And I just wanted to ask some thought provoking questions. Do you know any barber shops or salons? Since, you know, hair care --

Ms. Boley-Lee: There --

Maureen: -- is important.

Ms. Boley-Lee: -- there is, um --, in Lewiston or in Auburn there is a salon where it is a white woman's salon, but she has a biracial child. So she does do, uh, black hair. There is a black woman whose daughter graduated from USM a few years ago who does hair in her home. Uh, I don't go to her, but I do know people who do.

Maureen: All right.

Ms. Boley-Lee: But -- and there are no black barber shops to my knowledge, either.

Maureen: All right. Are there any other blacks in Lewiston or Auburn that stand out in your memory for any particular reason?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Other than Bates people -- um, yeah. Um, there is a church in Auburn, everybody refers to it as the black church. And at one time, this church would come together with my church, Trinity Episcopal Church, and -- and we would worship together. Either we'd go to their church or they would come to ours because we were both marginalized in the Catholic City of Lewiston. And, um, I believe we are the only Episcopal Church in Lewiston and there is one other in Auburn. Um, but that church would come together. They called it the black church because it always had black ministers and most of their parishioners were the black community in Lewiston and Auburn, though they have many white members as well.

- Maureen: So are you referring to Christ Temple?
- Ms. Boley-Lee: Christ Temple, yes. And then there was, um, the brother of, uh, Carrie Chambers who has since deceased, uh, has since died. Um, I can't remember his name either. I'm getting old. But he, uh, was, uh, quite a figure in Lewiston. He'd been around a long time. He moved from Boston here and was very active and was very active in just about everything, um, in Lewiston.
- Maureen: Now, labor is a theme for this project. We talked a lot about labor in different ways, but one of the questions that has driven this project has been a desire to understand how African Americans have fit into the history of the mills in Lewiston and Auburn. We oftentimes think about the Franco-American population in relation to the mills. But do you know of any African Americans that have ever worked in the local mills?
- Ms. Boley-Lee: Well, up until today, I -- no. But in, uh -- in our conversation, I did find out that, um, uh, a Bates employee, Robinson, I think is his last name, um --
- Maureen: Jim Taylor?
- Ms. Boley-Lee: -- oh, Taylor, Jim Taylor, uh, works -- had worked at the Bates Mill. Uh, I was told when I came here that people remembered some Chinese people working there, but they didn't remember any African Americans. Um, we've had, um -- Jim Taylor's mother who was the registrar at Bates for years, I mean a long time, she



retired from Bates. Um, and I'm not sure, of, um, this one from --  
that worked in the shoe --

Maureen: Factory?

Ms. Boley-Lee: -- factory. Yeah. But I don't know personally anyone that has  
worked in the mills or the factories.

Maureen: But it seem that the popular history of the mills don't -- doesn't  
really kind of recognize --

Ms. Boley-Lee: No. They don't reflect any people of color. Those older people  
who I've spoken to at Bates who work in our dining service who  
are in their 60's and 70's, they only remember Chinese. And all of  
them came from the mills to Bates. They only remember Chinese.  
Um, they don't know of any history of any other group.

Maureen: That's interesting.

Ms. Boley-Lee: Yeah. And I was curious, uh, because a lot of times we come to  
places because of work and, so, I found it interesting that there  
wouldn't have been more black people in Lewiston based on the  
fact that it was a manufacturing community.

Maureen: Right.

Ms. Boley-Lee: But that was not the case because it was the Canadians who came  
down to our (inaudible) --

Maureen: Or in some cases were, kind of, solicited?

Ms. Boley-Lee: That's right, exactly, to come down. Mmm hmm.

Maureen: The last set of questions are a little more reflective, I guess. How would you describe living in this area? You've lived here for a number of years.

Ms. Boley-Lee: Mmm hmm.

Maureen: How would you describe it, how would you characterize it?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Let me start by saying when I came here eight and a half years ago, I thought, okay, I'll come, I'll work and I'll leave. Um, I'm finishing up my career and I'm staying. It's been an interesting experience because I feel that I don't have the kind of community that I have been used to, where I have lived in the past. Um, so that my community is smaller, no family here, and, um, it's more of a integrated community. Um, I do find, and I tell everybody this, that some of the nicest people I've ever met live here. And, um, the people are honest and I feel safe. And that's really important to me, to feel safe and to feel that I'm living in a community where I'm not going to always have to wonder if I'm being ripped off.

Maureen: Mmm hmm. Are there any events in Lewiston and Auburn's general history, but particularly African American, uh, history, that stands out in your memory? The 'Many and One' is probably a more recent development that centers around issues of race.

Ms. Boley-Lee: Mmm hmm.

Maureen: But are there anything else -- anything else that stands in your --

Ms. Boley-Lee: The fair that the, um -- festival, Festival de Joie that they hold every year, um, I noticed, about three years ago, there were some young African American people, young people, walking in the parade. Um, my first thought was, where did they get them from. But then I realized that there are young families here with young children in the schools and also some of the students came from Portland. That's my understanding. But, uh, over the years there have been adults also in the parade. So, I would say that is beginning to be more of a multicultural affair now, instead of just a French parade or French festival. Um, the L/A Arts, many of their venues, they bring African American performers. So that's really wonderful to get to see my music, you know, and my theater.

Maureen: Have you had any connection or membership with the NAACP in the time that you have been here?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Yes, I have. I joined the NAACP when I came to Maine. I do not go down to the meetings very frequently because it's just difficult. My job sometimes keeps me here at night or out of town. But we - - we have a Neville Knowles who has been the past president, and he and I talk, and he keeps me up to date on what's going on in the state with the NAACP.

Maureen: And you have already mentioned your relationship with Christ Temple.

Ms. Boley-Lee: Mmm hmm.

Maureen: Um, what things do you find unique to living in Maine or Lewiston, Auburn that you haven't already mentioned or answered --

Ms. Boley-Lee: I think that living here as a person who is not well represented in the community makes you really use the resources that you have for survival. Um, it makes you really reach out to communities that you wouldn't normally reach out to easily, because they are the only ones here. Um, um, and it does, also -- I think I've become more, um, um, reflective of things that I'm interested in, instead of being, um, moved by your surroundings.

[Joanna Boley-Lee, TAPE 1, SIDE B]

Maureen: All right. Resuming. The last -- the last major question I have is a difficult question. So, please feel free to say what you want to say, but also don't feel you have to say anything that you are not comfortable with.

Ms. Boley-Lee: Okay.

Maureen: It is -- it is certainly a loaded question. Um, but one of the very interesting pieces in the African American collection at the University of Southern Maine is the 1925 Charter of the Ku Klux Klan of Androscoggin County. Now, I know in 1925 you weren't here, ah, but my question is, in the time that you have been here have you heard people talk about this organization --

Ms. Boley-Lee: Mmm hmm.

Maureen: -- um, in the history of this area? You know, the "Many and One" and the issue of the white supremacist group, that is a different entity and they share some principles, but have you ever heard people talk about the presence of this organization?

Ms. Boley-Lee: You know, it's amazing, not as many people as I would have thought. In fact, I believe that most of the people in this area didn't even know they were here, certainly didn't know that they had a charter that was founded in 1925. Um, the people who know, um, are few. My assistant and I have talked about it and she said she was so surprised when she found out. So, you don't hear a lot of talk about it. However, when I found out, I thought -- I was not surprised. I came here from New Jersey where there are a number of chapters of the Klan. But -- but I was surprised that the Mainers, themselves, either didn't know, which most of them say they didn't, or they don't choose to talk about it. Um, it's hard to believe that they were founded, or that this chapter was founded in 1925 which was not that long ago.

Maureen: Right.

Ms. Boley-Lee: You know. So -- and that it's not still functioning.

Maureen: Right.

Ms. Boley-Lee: Though I do think it is still functioning in the state, but not in Lewiston.

Maureen: Right. Right. And that's -- that's the kind of open-ended aspect of it. It was chartered in 1925, but -- and that was a time when there was a heightened, actually, -- historically, and there's a lot of studies that have been done about the Klan in Maine. So the 1920's were years that there was a heightened Klan presence. So, Auburn doesn't stand outside other places in the state --

Ms. Boley-Lee: That's right.

Maureen: -- and it's probably likely followed the same pattern that by the end of the 1920's it was in significant decline.

Ms. Boley-Lee: Mmm hmm.

Maureen: Um, so I'm not certainly putting forth that it is still in operation --

Ms. Boley-Lee: Well, I believe when I came here there was talk that there was still a Klan presence, but that it was further north. Um, and then there was, um, the burning of a black man's store which was up around China, um, around Route 202, um, and so this -- I came here in 1995 so this would have happened perhaps in '94 'because was -- or maybe even '95 -- it had already happened when I came. And, um, it was suspected that it was the Klan that actually did burn his store or, uh, instigated it. And he thought about staying, but he had finally took his family and they -- they did leave. But he had a very lucrative business, I understand, because he had the only store in that general vicinity and -- and it was destroyed.

Maureen: Okay. Now I'm finished with my official script. Are there any things you would like to add? Are there any questions I didn't ask you that you (inaudible) want to offer?

Ms. Boley-Lee: Hmm. Yeah. I -- I think my closing reflections would be that when I came to Lewiston I remember walking across the bridge that goes across the Androscoggin, the extension of Main Street, just sort of looking out, and there was a black man with a camera and I thought, good, there's a black person. So I went up to him and I introduced myself, told him I was new in the area and he tells me he was visiting. I don't think I saw another black person for at least a month, and I was going out to the supermarkets, et cetera. But within the, maybe three or four years after I moved here, or maybe less, I saw a marked increase in the presence of black people, and this is before the Somalians and the Togolese. So maybe it was two years after I -- and, um, I don't know where they came from. And even now I see people riding down the street. So I say that this community is changing and, um, black people have found Lewiston and, I think are setting up residency here. Yeah. It's kind of nice.

Maureen: Great.

Ms. Boley-Lee: So, I will close with that.

Maureen: Okay. Once again, thank you, Joanna, for your time and --

Ms. Boley-Lee: You're welcome.

Maureen: -- I really appreciate doing this interview.

Ms. Boley-Lee: My pleasure.

Maureen: This ends the "Home Is Where I Make It" Race and Labor in  
Lewiston and Auburn, Maine interview with Ms. Joanna Boley-  
Lee.