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Bourgeois, Henry oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

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Interview with Henry Bourgeois by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Bourgeois, Henry

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

September 19, 2000

Place

Augusta, Maine

ID Number

MOH 206

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Biographical Note

Henry Bourgeois was born July 22, 1945 in Marlborough, Massachusetts. He came from a Franco-American background and his grandparents were New England mill workers. His father was an entrepreneur and his business provided LPG gas for heating homes. Bourgeois grew up in Massachusetts and then went to college at St. Anselms in Manchester, New Hampshire and graduated as a double major in sociology and economics. He then successfully pursued his graduate degree in library science at the University of New Hampshire while working at the Nashua High School library in Nashua, New Hampshire. After he graduated, he moved to Lewiston, Maine to run the Lewiston Public Library. Lewiston was chosen as a recipient for the Model Cities program in 1968 and Bourgeois took over directing the program around 1969-1970 and left it in 1973. At the time of this interview he worked at the Maine Development Foundation.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: family background; Lewiston Public Library; Lewiston-Auburn Arts Council; *au Canada*; Model Cities program; Maine Development Foundation; and Muskie's impact on Maine.

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Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview on September 19th, the year 2000 at 10:00 A.M. at the Maine Development Foundation in Augusta, Maine with Henry Bourgeois. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu. I know that last time Robert did an interview with you he touched on a lot of different points. Some of them I'd like to go a little further with and that's what this interview is going to be about today, and cover any bases that he didn't get to then. So, you talked a little bit about your family background, coming from Marlborough, Mass. and that your father was somewhat of an entrepreneur. Can you tell me a little bit about that, what sort of businesses did he-?

Henry Bourgeois: Well, let's see, my father was born in Manchester, New Hampshire, his parents were from Moncton, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick. And he had a business after WWII that provided liquefied petroleum gas, LPG gas, to homes for cooking and heating purposes. And so he had two or three employees and four or five trucks and always very busy. And that was his business.

AL: And you said all of your grandparents worked in the mills?

HB: They did.

AL: In different areas or were they in the same?

HB: They worked all over New England. Manchester, my father in fact worked for United Shoe Machinery Corporation before WWII, and that was a company that installed and maintained shoe making and textile making equipment, and he worked all over New England. In fact he was in Lewiston during the great flood of '38, 1938. So they worked all over the region, and they wound up, most of them, in Marlborough, Massachusetts. My mother's parents worked

in the mills as well.

AL: In Massachusetts?

HB: In Marlborough, Massachusetts, yes.

AL: And were those textile mills?

HB: Both textile and shoe.

AL: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

HB: I do, I have one older sister, step-sister, deceased, and let's see, two brothers and another sister still alive (*unintelligible phrase*).

AL: So you came from a good size family.

HB: Yes.

AL: And, you talked a little bit about your college years, that you went to St. Anselm's?

HB: Yup.

AL: What course of study did you pursue there, and then later in graduate school?

HB: In, at St. A's I was a liberal arts major, it's a liberal arts school pretty much, and I majored in sociology and economics as a double major. And in graduate school in education and library science at UNH.

AL: And that's, then you went on to the Lewiston Public Library?

HB: Well, while I was getting my graduate degree at night I worked at the Nashua High School library in Nashua, New Hampshire for two years, then went to the Lewiston Public Library after that.

AL: And what was it like taking on the directorship at such a young age?

HB: It was scary, it was very intimidating going from a one and a half person library in Nashua to twenty employees in Lewiston. It was a big deal. I learned a lot fast.

AL: What sort of, were there any goals or projects that the Lewiston Library was involved in at the time you came, or that you took on as you became director?

HB: There were no projects when I started. It was a pretty quiet, pretty quiet library. And I was full of energy and ideas and we started several projects. We, the big project, which we never succeeded in achieving, although they have now, was to build a new library. We tried to

build a new library and we almost made it, we lost by one vote in the city council in 1968. We had grand plans to build a library, a lot of community excitement about a new library but we were never able to quite get the city to borrow the money to build it. We used at the time a lot of federal money that was coming into Maine and the country to expand the library services. We put paperback books in both languages in bars, beauty parlors and barber shops as a way to get adults to read more and to pull them into the library. It was very controversial, the notion of having library books loaned out at bars was, was, well it took a while to get used to.

AL: Did you have some success, do you feel?

HB: We did, we dramatically increased the circulation, which is one of the numbers librarians use to tell you what a great job they're doing. So we sort of doubled the circulation figures back in the late sixties. And it was just an exciting place to be. We did a lot of other things, we started an arts council in Lewiston-Auburn, the Lewiston-Auburn Arts Council, I helped to get that going. And we had a festival called *au Canada*, which we ran for three or four years where we brought the Montreal symphony down twice. It was a kick, we had a lot of fun. Got a lot of people reenergized about Lewiston and Lewiston-Auburn.

AL: And when you were talking about having books in both languages you were speaking of French and English.

HB: Yes.

AL: Now, do you speak French?

HB: No, I don't, no.

AL: But you're Franco American background.

HB: Background, hm-hmm.

AL: You also talked about Model Cities somewhat. You were a director of the library at the same time you were director of Model Cities, did they overlap?

HB: Well no, I was not director of both at the same time. I was director of the library, and in the, right after I started work in Lewiston somehow I got pulled into a lot of community activity in the downtown area. And the city's public works director whose name at the time was Bill Adams, he found out somehow about Model Cities. He was looking for money to build new roads and sewers, and Muskie had introduced the legislation that was enacted and Portland had just received a major Model Cities designation and Adams asked me, asked my help in writing a proposal to get fed-, to become a Model Cities community, which I did, we organized a citizen's committee. Just by coincidence I lived in the Model Cities neighborhood, the downtown area, and my first involvement was in getting the citizens organized and writing the proposal to get the money from the feds. And we hired a, we hired a couple of different directors of Model Cities. I wound up as chair of the citizen's committee, which hired the directors, neither one of whom worked out. One was from, a local guy who didn't work out, and the other was a guy from away

who really didn't work out, and it was really frustrating and the citizens were all upset. And Mayor Clifford at the time asked me to run it. So I left the library and ran Model Cities.

AL: So that's how you came to be associated with that.

HB: Yes.

AL: And Model Cities was for how long, how long did the project run?

HB: In Lewiston from about '68 to '74. I left in '73.

AL: So each year you would be des-, was it a yearly thing, you'd be designated so much money?

HB: No, it, yes, it was a multi-year designation, five-year designation. Each year you were designated, we were designated two million dollars in discretionary money. But we were also designated a lot of other latitude to secure more federal money, and the rules about federal money is that you can't use federal money to match federal money. Most federal money that communities receive have to be matched locally, and if you're a poor community as Lewiston is, it's, you can't find the money locally, so Model Cities said, HUD said, that you could use Model Cities federal money to match federal money. So the two million dollars a year leveraged another six or seven million dollars for housing and childcare and all kinds of programs like that.

AL: Can we still see in the Lewiston area effects of Model Cities today, and if so in what ways?

HB: Physically you can, it's hard to see them I suppose. A lot of the effects are buried, new water mains, new fire trucks. This was a long time ago, twenty-two years ago, twenty years ago, so, new housing, a lot of the housing was rehabbed. The multi purpose center was a Model Cities purchased event. We sort of circumvented some HUD law but we got around it okay legally. That's probably the most visible Model Cities initiative. We tried to do a lot of downtown development work but that didn't work out very well.

AL: Why do you think that didn't work? Were there roadblocks as far as city councilor or?

HB: No, not really. I think we basically didn't understand then, most cities didn't understand, what makes a downtown work and why, you know, how businesses operate and what the role of a government is in helping a business to make an investment. So for a lot of reasons it just wasn't very successful. Probably the most significant outcome of Model Cities was, was an intangible. We really empowered a lot of people.

AL: You mentioned that in the first interview and in, how did that happen, in what ways were they empowered?

HB: Well they were asked to be on all these committees, we had six committees, a committee for each topical area that we worked on. So there was a physical improvement committee, there

was health and human services committee, and we had citizens running the committees. We had bureaucrats, state and mostly local government people on as well who were very committed people but the majority of the members were citizens who were elected by their peers or, I forget really how they were done. And the citizens kind of ran things. Our staff, we had twenty-five or six staff, managed the process and facilitated it and gave them information, but we really, we really put them forward to help them make decisions.

AL: So they got to be a part of the process and learned how the process works and have a voice?

HB: Yes, yes, to the point where many of them ran for city council and were elected. Lillian Caron is the best example of that. And others became directors of agencies, went back to college, did all kinds of neat things. And that probably was the most important outcome, which one could have achieved with a lot less money, but the money was the lever to get them engaged.

AL: Who were some of the other people besides yourself who worked for the majority of the project with you?

HB: The Model Cities project?

AL: The Model Cities.

HB: Well, the mayors were very supportive and involved. John Orestis in particular, he was the mayor at the time. The mayors could serve then one year at a time and they could not serve for any more than two years. So, Bill Rocheleau, John Orestis, Bob Clifford, John Beliveau, they were all very, very engaged in the process. The staff people we had were people like Linda Harvell who works for the state now, Susan Johanson who's an attorney, Dean Docher who's back in Minnesota, a lot of young staff mostly from Bates College, Steve Griswold, he was on the staff. We hired a lot of Bates College graduates who were young and eager and full of energy.

AL: Was Robert Couturier involved in that at all?

HB: It's a very familiar name, he may have been, I'm not sure. We had, in addition to our staff we had projects we funded and those projects engaged staff, so we had a dyslexia project that we supported, we had a project that provided dental health to the residents, dental hygiene and health care. We had a neighborhood health clinic, we had all kinds of activities. So we had another, oh, dozens and dozens of staff doing things. He may have been one of them. To this day I still get, I still meet people who say remember Model Cities, and I don't really remember them but they were working in one of those agencies and we funded them or started them and kept them going.

AL: I have another question about Model Cities. I know that Portland was chosen in the first round, the first seventy-five round, and Lewiston in the second.

HB: That's right.

AL: And so you were separate projects, you had different goals, but did you work at all together, was there any sort of communication? Or was it, did it not, was it not necessary regarding what you were doing?

HB: We didn't work at all together. There was very little communication, although I knew the director of the Portland programs. The Portland programs were directed by initially Jack Dexter, and then Jadine O'Brien, and both Dexter and O'Brien are still around. Dexter is a, works for A.G. Edwards, and O'Brien just retired from Blue Cross/Blue Shield as a government affairs person. And actually both of them were preceded by another guy whose name I forget who was sort of a legend among Model Cities directors, he was just very competent. But no, there was little communication and little learning from each other. So we were working more or less in isolation. A lot of support from HUD, the Manchester regional office especially and there was an association of Model Cities directors that met regularly in Washington so I was down there a lot learning from them. But there could have been a lot more to encourage learning and, you know, lessons learned from mistakes made, that kind of thing. There wasn't much of that.

AL: You talked about Ed Muskie having been a very strong influence in helping Lewiston get the Model Cities project.

HB: Yes.

AL: Did you have communications with him at the time that you were trying to apply and receive?

HB: The city did, the city government did, especially through Bill Adams. Other people who were there then in city government who were connected to this proposal especially was Lucien Gosselin. Lucien Gosselin was the city's controller at the time, he'd just been promoted from purchasing agent to controller. The city didn't have a city manager, and Lucien reported to the finance committee, which was the most powerful committee, so Lucien was the, sort of the kingpin. And I don't recall but I'm sure he was very involved in those conversations with Muskie or with Bill Adams and Muskie. But I wasn't directly involved with Muskie. What I, I was directly involved in conversations with the HUD people, in negotiating the terms of the contract for the city, that kind of stuff.

AL: You mentioned different programs that were going on at the time, and you mentioned one called OEO?

HB: Yes.

AL: What does that stand for?

HB: The Office of Economic Opportunity. The U.S. government created this Office of Economic Opportunity to promote equal housing, housing for everyone. Just to promote the War on Poverty programs. There was a special office, OEO office as part of the executive branch, it wasn't part of the line agency, and then there was HUD and all the other line agencies,

DOL and HEW, it was HEW then. But OEO had its own staff and they put a lot of money out. They created the community action agencies, so there was another overlay on top of all the community action agencies. And there was always a lot of tension between the community action agency in Lewiston, which covered a broad geographic region, and our agency, the Model Cities agency because we had all the money and all the clout and the focus, and they had none of those things, they were really struggling.

AL: You've worked a lot in economic development. I have two questions, the first one is you now work at the Maine Development Foundation. What do they do?

HB: Well, our mission is to champion long term economic growth, and the way we do that is primarily by building leadership capacity among men and women in Maine who are already in leadership positions. And the way we do that is by, a lot of the lessons learned from Model Cities, mostly empowering lessons. It's remarkable how many business people in Maine don't feel empowered to engage with government, or government people don't feel empowered to learn about or engage with business people. So a lot of what we do is training and development leading to enhanced interaction among them so they can do stuff to make the economy work better. So we have a half a dozen programs we run, it's privately financed for the most part from businesses and others, and it's a blast.

AL: But how do you get people together? Do they seek you out as someone to help them connect, or?

HB: Sometimes, sometimes they do. The governor sought us out to support the health care commission that he appointed, the cities of Waterville, Oakland, Fairfield and another one I forget sought us out a few months ago to prepare an economic development strategy for them. We also have some self sufficient programs that continue every year, like Leadership Maine where we invite men and women across the state to participate in a thirteen day, nine month leadership training program. And so they sign up for that or apply for that, we accept them, and they go through our program. So a lot of activity we do ourselves, other activity we do because we're asked.

AL: How does Aroostook County fit into the Maine Development, is there, is there sort of a plan for Aroostook County, or is there, I mean they're so far north and as we know they struggle economically, always have and still do. Is, do you have any connection with the county in that way?

HB: We do. We don't have a project up there now but we have a couple dozen people who have been through our programs and who are leaders in Aroostook County. This year's Leadership Maine class, for example, has the city managers of Madawaska and Presque Isle in it. We always take bus tours of the county looking at the economy for legislators, newly elected legislators. So that's how we engage the county. And occasionally there's a project or there's an activity that somebody pays us to do in the county. We helped with the Opportunity Zones years ago in the central part of the county. We work in different regions when we're asked to. We just haven't been asked to Aroostook. We've done a lot of work lately in the Waterville area, Washington County which is far more poor than Aroostook County, and Portland.

AL: Now you said you worked more directly with HUD during Model Cities. Did you have occasion over the years to ever interact with Ed Muskie?

HB: Just a couple times, visits to Washington with Orestis or other politicians, or he came to visit us. But no, very seldom really as I mentioned the last time. My interaction was more with his, the staff people.

AL: When you did interact with him those couple of times, did you form an impression of what he was like, how, did he seem like he had an understanding of the Model Cities project?

HB: Oh yes, he did, he was very curious about how it was working and very, his questions were just very insightful as I recall. He just really knew what was going on, it was fun to talk with him. Very demanding in his questioning. It was probably more than a couple of times, maybe it was, you know, once or twice a year for each of those five or six years I was running it. But it wasn't a close intimate relationship or anything like that, you know. It was the twice a year meeting with the congressional delegation to make sure they knew what we were doing. But Muskie was the key at that time.

AL: You really got that impression, that he -?

HB: Oh sure, absolutely, yeah, he was the leader.

AL: As you were living in the state during many of the years that he was in the senate, did you get a sense of what you felt his strengths were, or what it was that he gave to Maine and to the nation as a senator and a statesman?

HB: That's a good question. I'm not a, I wasn't born in Maine so I didn't live here all my life. I have this perception that what he gave mostly was a sense of integrity and, just high integrity, you know, just in everything he said and did. And that was a statement for Mainers as much as it was about Mainers. So when he was, when people in other parts of the country saw him I think they had an impression of Maine as a place that's peopled by folks of high integrity, don't waste a lot of words, just get the job done, that's the impression I had then and still have now. It was a remarkable time in our country's history. In my living memory of it, if you think about the last thirty years in our country, I don't think any time domestically has there been such innovation and experimentation, and just creative thought given to domestic issues.

AL: I think that's all the questions I had. Was there anything you'd want to add that I didn't touch upon that you feel is important?

HB: Not really, just the last piece I threw in, I mean it was just a different time than today, than it has been the last few years. Just think about what the presidents have done, or congress has tried to do to support domestic issues the last few years. Nothing comes close to what was tried in the War on Poverty. Actually right up into '74 when Nixon was impeached, and just before he was impeached when the community (*unintelligible word*) welfare program went through. It was just a very exciting time.

AL: Great, thank you very much.

HB: Yeah, you're welcome, thank you.

End of Interview