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Bourgeois, Henry oral history interview

Robert Ruttmann

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Interview with Henry Bourgeois by Robert Ruttmann

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Bourgeois, Henry

Interviewer

Ruttmann, Robert

Date

July 11, 2000

Place

Augusta, Maine

ID Number

MOH 193

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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 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; President Johnson's "War on Poverty"; Model Cities; 1972 presidential campaign; Maine politicians; the "character" of Maine; Paul Couture; John Orestis; 1968 Humphrey-Muskie ticket; Vietnam; Muskie's 1972 campaign; *Manchester Union Leader*; Nixon's "dirty tricks"; Vietnam War; Watergate; and Muskie's public speaking.

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Transcript

Robert Ruttman: This is an interview with Mr. Henry Bourgeois, the interviewer is Robert Ruttman, and we're here on 45 Monument Circle in Augusta, Maine on this day, 11th of July in the year 2000. And Mr. Bourgeois, we're going to start off by asking you if you could please name and spell your full name and your date of birth and the place you were born.

Henry Bourgeois: Henry Bourgeois, H-E-N-R-Y, B-O-U-R-G-E-O-I-S. July 22, 1943, Marlborough, Massachusetts.

RR: Did you grow up in Marlborough?

HB: Yes.

RR: Yes. Could you tell me a little bit about your family life and background, the prevailing socio-economic circumstances of the time you grew up in?

HB: It was post WWII, Korean War, late '40s, early '50s, lower middle class working family, father an entrepreneur, grandparents all had worked in mills, large Italian family on my mother's side, Franco-American obviously on my father's.

RR: Were your parents involved in any community activities?

HB: No.

RR: Not at all?

HB: No.

RR: Were they Republicans or Democrats?

HB: I don't know, not sure. A little bit of each probably. I think they voted the person. They weren't active politically.

RR: I see. When did you graduate high school?

HB: Sixty-one.

RR: And you went up to college in New Hampshire after that?

HB: Yes, St. Anselm's College.

RR: I see. When were your political views, when did you first become politically aware, I guess I would say?

HB: Probably in graduate school, during the Vietnam War. I was actively opposed to the war. I was running a high school library in Nashua, New Hampshire in '65 and '66 right out of college and got very active-small 'p' politically in efforts to oppose the war.

RR: I see. What were your impressions with regard to Senator Muskie during these times?

HB: None, really. From Massachusetts, worked in New Hampshire, went to college in New Hampshire. I went to Maine in 1967 to run the Lewiston Public Library and that's when I began to interact with Muskie.

RR: Can you remember your first meeting with him?

HB: It was in Washington, D.C. He had recently authored the Metropolitan Cities Act, which spawned, gave birth to the Model Cities Program, which I wound up administering in Lewiston, Maine.

RR: I see. Could you discuss the model cities program a little more?

HB: It was one of President Johnson's War on Poverty programs launched in the late sixties with a whole slew of others, OEO and a few others. There were a hundred and fifty cities in the country designated as model cities, cities in two seventy-five city rounds, we were in the second round in Lewiston, Portland was the first. The only two in Maine were Portland and Lewiston. And we secured the designation largely because of Senator Muskie. He not only authored the original legislation, but helped us work through HUD to get the designation. Lewiston's a very poor city, so it was easy to make the case. I was a public library director and the chair of the citizens committee in the lower, in the inner part of the city that put the application together and

hired the first two directors before I wound up directing it myself.

RR: What were your first impressions of Senator Muskie?

HB: Oh, just a real leader, just, similar to my impressions of Maine. Very solid, honest, deeply caring, committed to the community and to the state. He, like President Kennedy, I guess, colored my lifelong view of the importance of good government and honesty and integrity in government.

RR: You were also involved in the Portland Model Cities Project?

HB: No, I was not. Portland was the sister city. They had their own model cities program. I was simply administering, leading and administering the one in Lewiston. I was not involved in Portland.

RR: I see. Did the program, would you say in Lewiston, did it succeed in meeting its goals?

HB: It succeeded beyond expectation in some ways and underperformed in others. I mean, its purpose was to eliminate poverty. It did not succeed in doing that. It took us a few years to realize that the real magic in making it work wasn't building new roads and buying fire trucks and, you know, down town, inner city dental programs, and whatever. The real trick, the real magic was in empowering people. So through the process of model cities in Lewiston we wound up empowering a whole bunch of people, who subsequently wound up on the city council, and they really changed the way the government worked, and they began to change the way services were provided to low income people. We were not successful in making a dent in education participation or attainment levels in Lewiston, and I've learned since that that's far more basic and important if you're trying to affect economic growth.

RR: Is there anything you might have done differently do you think, retrospectively?

HB: Sure, less bricks and mortar, more investment in education, much more investment in the people in the city, much more investment in their training and helping them work collaboratively; much more investment in the people and not in the buildings or the roads or the housing.

RR: By that you mean teaching more entrepreneurial skills?

HB: No, that could be part of it. I mean more dealing with some of the issues the people were facing caused by poverty in part, but aggravating poverty: alcoholism, drugs, that thing, still. Some of those issues could have been dealt with long term by increasing the education attainment level. We could have gone after a college a lot earlier; we could have built better schools in the inner city. Instead we built better roads and better sewer lines, which were needed desperately, but did not make the investments in people that we should have.

RR: Where would you say did Senator Muskie's sensitivity, or even attentiveness lie in regards to these Model Cities programs as you just described in relation to those topics?

HB: I think, I only, my only experience is with Lewiston and the senator in that context, so it's limited I guess. My view is that, that the senator just knew instinctively what needed to be done, and he knew that the model that HUD used was the right one. The model was give the money to the cities and let them figure out how to spend it, which HUD did. They gave us two million dollars a year, and it was discretionary, which was a lot of money back then. We chose to spend it on roads and buildings and things. We made an obvious physical impact on the community, and everybody thought it was just wonderful, but it wasn't lasting. And if there was a flaw in the thinking about Model Cities and the thinking about the War on Poverty programs, it was probably in not thinking through more systemically and causally what the hell causes all those problems. And one of the answers for me is educating kids, educating adults. Not toward degrees, necessarily but deep constant life long learning type of education so that one's aspirations are lifted, one's expectations are lifted, all that stuff you're learning at Bates.

And that wasn't a, that wasn't so much a flaw in Muskie's thinking or his staff's thinking. It was just the way we were looking at the world back then, you know? The inner cities have been, are in tough shape, let's pour some money into them. The neat thing about model cities is it was block grant money. It was the predecessor to the block grant program that Nixon launched in '74 by almost ten years. And they gave the cities the power to decide how to spend it. What they didn't give us was the training they could have given us or the leadership building they could have given us to help us figure out how best to spend the money.

RR: Did you want to say something else?

HB: No.

RR: Oh. Would you say that Senator Muskie, from your recollection, did he keep a good touch with the cities? Did he come back and visit often and make an assessment as to what exactly was needed? Where do you think his most valuable qualities and his most valuable assets lay?

HB: I'm not sure I can answer all that. I know he visited Lewiston often. I know we hosted his visits often. I think he had an affinity for the city, for some of the people in the city. Some of the principals who were working in the Lewiston Model Cities Program had been involved in working for Muskie, working in Washington, so there was some personal connections. I just don't know to what extent what he learned in Lewiston or in Portland influenced how he felt about the program or changed the program. I think, I always had the feeling he was not a detail person, wasn't worried about the knits and gnats of it but rather was always looking for the, at the big picture. Certainly the Metropolitan Cities Act, which launched metropolitan government enabling legislation in Washington, it was the 8195 process, he, I mean he had great vision around that. Or somebody on his staff did if he didn't. I assume it was him.

RR: And you said he didn't, he wasn't too meticulous about taking care of the details but rather more, as you say, more of a visionary (*unintelligible phrase*)?

HB: Yes, that was the impression I always had, yes.

RR: And do you believe that this was one of his qualities, served as a value, or more as a vice?

HB: Oh, I think so, oh no, I, absolutely it's a quality, yeah, absolutely. I always, I've always thought that.

RR: What do you think were some of his strongest qualities as a politician and as a state, both state and a national politician?

HB: Well, again, I wasn't involved politically with him, I never ran, worked in his campaign or anything, so there was never a personal connection that way. What I always admired about him was his high integrity, his honesty, his forthrightness, and for me that spoke not just about Muskie but about Maine, which is why, one of the reasons I've stayed in Maine.

RR: That's wonderful. What gave you the impression that he had such a strong integrity? I've heard you mention that several times, and I've heard numerous people mention that he had such an outstanding sense of integrity. What gave you that impression?

HB: Just the few times I was with him, the way he carried himself, the way he asked questions that might not have been the most comfortable questions. The honest way he expressed himself on issues. It all culminated in the election of course, but, the presidential election.

RR: In 1972?

HB: Yeah, right. But I've always felt that he, George Mitchell and others, he's not the only one certainly, really say something special about Maine. Bill Cohen, the same ilk, the same, I don't know.

RR: What kind of, can you think of, what politicians do you think have been the most influential in the last twentieth century, if you could pick three politicians, in developing the Maine political system?

HB: Oh, in Maine.

RR: Yeah, I'm sorry.

HB: Let's see. Well, Ken Curtis. I guess, I guess probably the three most, well actually we have several, it's hard to just limit it to three. In terms of state government in the state of Maine it's clearly, in my view, it's Curtis, Angus King and Muskie, those three. In terms of sort of national stature, it's Muskie and Mitchell. And Mitchell is just extraordinary. And Cohen, Cohen as well. You know, it's just remarkable that a state like this had three people, so, with numerous folks, but that's my view.

RR: What do you think is the reason, I'm just thinking as you mentioned Angus King, that a small state like Maine has, has had in the last twentieth century had two independent governors, and presently we have two female U.S. senators, and also dating back to Margaret Chase Smith, who also delivered a prominent role. What do you think is the reason that Maine politics seems

to embrace the minority, or the *avant-garde* kind of political channel?

HB: I don't know. I think that's a wonderful question. I don't know what the answer to that question is. I mean, the answers given are Yankee independence, the relative isolation Maine has, very, very little immigration into our state, the cold winters. I mean, who the hell knows? The long history of people living here generation after generation. I'm not sure why that all, or if that all adds up to the qualities and characteristics of the people you've mentioned. I don't know what the answer is.

RR: If I could ask you any question with regard to Senator Muskie, is there any question that you might want me to ask you?

HB: (*Unintelligible* phrase) not really.

RR: No?

HB: No, not really.

RR: That's just off the top of my head kind of thing. Let me ask you something else, were you involved in the Maine Development Foundation?

HB: For seventeen years, but not at the beginning, I was not here at the beginning.

RR: Did you come into contact with Senator Muskie in that regard?

HB: No I didn't, I started in 1983, so I never did. And I'd left the state between '73 and '83. I left model cities in '73 and went to Massachusetts to work, and New Hampshire, so I lost contact with Maine people.

RR: Could you give me a couple of impressions of a few people if they ring a bell at all? First of all, Faust Couture?

HB: I'm sorry, what's -?

RR: Faust Couture, C-O-U-T-U-R-E?

HB: No, I don't know him. Faust is his first name?

RR: Yeah, Faust.

HB: No.

RR: Roland Landry?

HB: Vague recollection, Lewiston politician? Don't know, I don't recall. Is Couture the former alderman?

RR: Yeah.

HB: Oh, gosh, oh boy, if it's the same one, there was an alderman, the Lewiston city council men, it was called aldermen. What the hell was his first name? Anyway, there was an alderman who I think his name was [Paul] Couture who was there when I arrived. Lewiston city politics in '67 was very rough and tumble. They had no use for the library, let alone the librarian, and trying to get money out of them for library books, services, which is what I was about, was very difficult. And it was difficult to sell the Model Cities program even though it was free money from the feds. He was just a rude, if it's the same person, just a rude, angry, unpleasant, disrespectful, obnoxious politician. If it's the same person. Paul Couture, Paul, that's who I'm thinking about.

RR: Yeah, Paul Couture, okay. Then Faust Couture must have also been a relative. Paul Couture is actually deceased. Do you have any recollection of John Orestis?

HB: Orestis, oh sure, John and I worked together. Yeah, I know John very well, John Orestis. He and I helped to organize the Model Cities program. There were several others who were involved, but he was the vice chair of the committee, I was the chair of the committee, he became mayor, he app-, in fact I left model cities when he was the mayor of Lewiston. Yeah, he's a great guy. He still lives in Lewiston or lives in Yarmouth I guess.

RR: What are your reasons for leaving the Model Cities, were they philosophic or anything?

HB: Oh no, I got burned out. The program was closing down over two or three years beginning in '72, and I just had worked too many years both as a volunteer citizen, activist, and then as the director of the thing and I just got burned out, had to get away.

RR: Let's go back to '68, Humphrey-Muskie ticket. Did you vote for them, for that ticket?

HB: Yes, I did, yeah.

RR: What were your impressions of the dynamic of that campaign?

HB: Vague, not clear. No, the impressions I have of back then, outside of Lewiston, sort of the national politics, was all about the war and getting out of the war and what a horrible thing it was and how frustrated everybody was.

RR: Did you actively participate in anti-war demonstrations?

HB: I did but not as actively as I felt I should or wanted to. I was just so wrapped up in work. I mean Model Cities then was, well, it was like working the Peace Corps, you know. I've never been in the Peace Corps, but it was just ninety hour weeks, we had a staff of twenty-six people, half of whom were from Bates, all young, all of us were under thirty and just raising hell and just working our asses off to fix down town Lewiston, you know, and . . .

RR: Sounds like a great time, too, though.

HB: It was a wonderful time, it was an extraordinary time then. You know, everything was possible, and, oh, the money was just everywhere. And the Paul Coutures were the antagonists. It wasn't the federal government or the state government, it was ourselves. I was always fighting with City Hall.

RR: What do you think was Paul Couture's motivation for being so antagonistic?

HB: I don't know, I don't know, but he was not a happy person. He was just openly hostile to everybody, not just me; just a bad politician.

RR: Did your relationship with Senator Muskie evolve over the years at all? You mentioned that it was very kind of superficial.

HB: No, it didn't, it was, and it did not evolve. I never knew him that well, nor he me. It never did evolve. There was never any reason for it to.

RR: Yeah, understandable. 1972, the Muskie presidential campaign, can you talk a little about that?

HB: I don't have a great deal to say. It was discouraging to watch him cry in front of the *Union Leader* and watch what Nixon was doing with the dirty tricks. It was a very discouraging time. It's hard to, it's hard to describe what it was like back then. Young professional, five or six years out of college, more responsibility than I ever thought I'd have or should have. I had that much presence of mind to know that I was over my head professionally. And so wrapped up in work and the cause of Model Cities and what we were trying to achieve, so committed to trying to end the war, and so disillusioned by national politics. And shortly after the election, you know, all the crap happened with Watergate, and, oh God, that was so discouraging. And Muskie was sort of part of that. I mean, this was this wonderful person who just got nailed by Nixon. It was, it was discouraging.

RR: What were your feelings when you saw, you said you saw him cry, what were your feelings? Can you remember at all?

HB: Just very discouraged, very disillusioned. Not in Muskie but about what the Republicans were doing. Very, very disillusioned, angry I guess.

RR: Well, I think we pretty much reached our time limit, so I'm going to ask you one more question, and that's going to be if there's anything that you feel I haven't asked you that you might want to add that comes to mind that might be valuable?

HB: Well, not really. I wish I could give you more insight. I can't give you much because I was the recipient, as it turns out, of a program that his vision helped launch. I just didn't know him well enough to, you know, to reach any deep insight about him other than what most of us saw on TV or when we saw him speak.

RR: Well, okay, I appreciate you taking the time to come and talk to us.

HB: There was a time, there was a time in Kennedy Park in Lewiston, that's right across from City Hall in Lewiston, where he spoke. And it was, I forget the year, it was probably '71 or so, and he was just speaking at different meetings or something. And he was just riveting, he was really something.

RR: A good speaker.

HB: Well, yeah, but not a John Kennedy speaker, just a, just an honest straight shooter. And we had probably a thousand people there from the inner city. All of our committee members attended. It was quite something, quite moving.

RR: That's wonderful.

HB: Yeah, anyway.

RR: Thank you very much, Mr. Bourgeois, I appreciate it.

HB: I'm sorry this was so, cut short. I'm just racing around the last few days.

End of Interview