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Dawson, Pauline K. oral history interview

Mike Richard

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Interview with Pauline K. Dawson by Mike Richard

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Dawson, Pauline K.

Interviewer

Richard, Mike

Date

August 11, 1999

Place

Mexico, Maine

ID Number

MOH 127

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Biographical Note

Pauline K. Dawson was born on December 26, 1917 in Rumford, Maine to Christine Cyr and John Knauer. She was raised in Mexico, Maine and married Everett C. Dawson. She was secretary for the Oxford County Democratic Committee, and worked at the Oxford paper mill. She was one of five daughters. Her sister, Myrtle Milledge, was also interviewed for this project.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Rumford, Maine; Mexico, Maine; public school system; Oxford Mill; Democratic Party; Republican Party; Catholicism; stock market crash of 1929; and Ku Klux Klan (KKK) activities.

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Transcript

Mike Richard: The date is August 11th, 1999 and we're here at Mexico, Maine in the home of Pauline Dawson. Interviewing is Mike Richard. And Mrs. Dawson, could you please state your full name and spell it?

Pauline Dawson: Pauline K. Dawson, that's P-A-U-L-I-N-E, K, D-A-W-S-O-N.

MR: Okay, and when was your date of birth?

PD: Twelve – twenty-six – seventeen [12/26/17].

MR: And what town were you born in?

PD: In Rumford, Maine.

MR: And have you lived in the Rumford and Mexico area throughout your life?

PD: Yes, I have. Mexico really, I've never lived in Rumford. I was born , the hospital was in Rumford.

MR: Oh, okay. And let's talk a little bit about your family background. First of all, what were your parents' names?

PD: My father's name was John Knauer, my mother's name was Christine Cyr, she was from Canada; he was born in New York City.

MR: And, could you actually spell those names for the tape?

PD: J-O-H-N, K-N-A-U-E-R, and C-H-R-I-S-T-I-N-E, C-Y-R.

MR: Okay, thank you. And what were their occupations?

PD: My father had a s---, worked in the mill a short while, and then he and another fellow

started a little country store, and finally he bought the other fellow out. The other fellow wanted to go into farming. And he managed to have two stores, and that's about it, that's what he did. He worked hard, long hours. He died fairly young. And my mother worked in the mill. She was a counter and inspector in the paper mill.

MR: And this was the Oxford Paper Mill?

PD: Oxford Paper at the time, yes.

MR: And how many siblings did you have?

PD: I have two children, a boy and a girl.

MR: And did you have any brothers or sisters growing up?

PD: I had five sisters, and that's it.

MR: And what was your place among them?

PD: I was second, I was born second of the six girls.

MR: And actually, what were your sisters' names, just first names?

PD: There was Myrtle, you want the last name too?

MR: Sure, yeah.

PD: Well she, Myrtle Milledge, and there was Geraldine Burns, Janet Fish, Frances Gronin, Barbara Kelly, that's, that five? I think so.

MR: And have any of them been interested in politics or involved with politics in some way?

PD: My sister Myrt and I kind of went together, a few of these meetings and, Democratic meetings, but I was more, I was there more often than she was. And right now I have a niece that's active in town, only she's in the Republican, she's working for the Republicans.

MR: And what were your parents' political views?

PD: They were both Democrats. They were both Democrats.

MR: Was that the, the families that they came from were also generally Democrats, or?

PD: I'm not sure of that.

(Tape paused.)

PD: My father was German and my mother was French.

MR: And did they talk about politics much with you children at home?

PD: A little, not overly. They did talk politics some.

MR: And was there, would this stimulate a lot of conversation among you and your sisters?

PD: I think so, yeah. Most of us were Democrats at the time. I have one now that's kind of leaning towards the Republicans, out of the six. The others were, I don't think would stray from the Democrats but I don't know that.

MR: And what were your parents' religious beliefs?

PD: They were both Catholic.

MR: And also, what was the economic situation of your family when you were growing up?

PD: Well, with the six girls, my father had a hard time making a living. He worked hard, long hours, and it really was what killed him. My mother used to take in laundry to help, and then she finally went into the mill and worked as a, as I said, as a counter and an inspector of the paper. And that's pretty much it.

MR: And just in general, how do you think your parents' attitudes and beliefs affected you while you were growing up?

PD: I don't know. They wanted us to be honest children, and respect other people and beliefs, and to be fair with everyone. Pretty much that was their teaching.

MR: Okay, I'd like to talk to you about the town, Mexico, the community that you grew up in. And first of all, what was it like socially and politically at the time you were growing up?

PD: Let me think. I don't know, I think we had the best of times then, even though we had nothing. Everybody was the same, there were a few that had more than we did. But pretty much, most people had tried to work a garden or do something to make ends meet, like my mother did taking laundry, do ironing, along with my father working long hours. But our neighbors, we always got along with our neighbors, and they were a mixture of nationalities. Everybody seemed to love one another and that. We were happy.

MR: And what were some of the, we were talking about this a little bit off the tape, but what were some of the dominant ethnic groups, sort of prominent ethnic groups in the area?

PD: I think, as far as working in the mill, it seemed to be the Scottish people. I think they must have come from the old country and knew how to run a paper mill. They seemed to have the higher jobs in the mill, managing and supervisors and things because they knew their craft. But, what was your question again?

MR: Oh, just about what some of the ethnic groups in town were?

PD: Well, everybody worked hard, and nobody really got rich at that time, I mean until, of course in '29 when the crash came up everybody was hurting from that. And we didn't eat a lot; we didn't get, throw our money around very much.

MR: And what were some of the nationalities that were living in the area? You mentioned before there was Irish and Scottish?

PD: There was French, a lot of French, Lithuanians, and the Scotch and Irish, Italians, they had their section of town. It seemed like different areas had clumps of either Italian families or French families, or Lithuanian families. They seemed to like to be together, yet everybody mixed well. And we all played with one another, us, you know, it didn't matter what our nationality was, we just played and had fun.

MR: And you also mentioned off the tape there was some Ku Klux Klan activity (*unintelligible phrase*)?

PD: Yes, at one time. I didn't see it all. Well I saw a little bit of it because of the excitement the boys had when they knew that these Klans were having a meeting. They sensed that, the fact that there was secret, that it was secret, and that kind of intrigued them I guess. And they'd come back and relay the message to the girls. The girls wouldn't go anywhere near the building. They'd go down and try to look in the windows or something. And finally they burned a cross up in the ledge up in back of the town and most people saw it, but I didn't happen to see it, but I heard about it.

But it, the Klan built a foundation and put a cap on it, and they had their meetings there first. But finally they built quite a good size building and that building was used for many things after I think they dissolved, the Klan dissolved. And they played basketball there. Matter of fact, my father ran a roller-skating rink in that one hall.

And earlier, I must tell you about schools here. Earlier I went to school up over a bakery on the main street. The schools were so crowded they had to have a classroom up over a bakery, and after the classes they would take all the seats out and push them in the what was called a cloakroom, push all the seats out, they were on skids, push them all out in the back and then have basketball games in that one, where we had our classroom. So that's how bad things were in those days. Schools especially were hit hard.

MR: And you went to Mexico public schools through high school?

PD: Yes, and this was in sixth grade I think. It was sixth grade that I went down to, it was upstairs over a bakery. And we'd smell the doughnuts and really get hungry, we were ready to eat any time.

MR: And, so what were some of the interests that you had in school, through the high school

days, including your earlier elementary period?

PD: Well, I was never very athletic in that I'm short and, I tried basketball, I tried hockey, but I never made it really. I had the interest but I was never, I don't know whether it was. I think I was coordinated enough but there were so many girls that were taller and better than I was that I, I just got left behind.

But classroom, I guess I was average. I enjoyed school, enjoyed the teachers. Some of them I really liked, you know, better than others, but they were all good teachers, dedicated. And most of them even after they got through in the classroom would have extra jobs like coaching or, in those days I don't think they got paid extra for those jobs, or if they did it was very little. Today they do pretty well I think, if they take on a coaching job or collect tickets to ball games. They used to collect tickets at ball games and have other jobs to do besides teaching a class.

MR: And were there any particular classes or courses that you got really interested in, especially later on in high school?

PD: I liked history, ancient history. I liked math. I didn't care for literature for some reason. Shakespeare didn't interest me. I don't know, I liked most of it.

MR: Were you involved in, talking about high school years, were you involved in any clubs or extracurricular activities in high school?

PD: No, but I got busy, I was in a dance class and they used to have plays, and between the acts of plays a few girls and myself would be the entertainment during the half, or not the half but the, what is it, what do you call it, during the. . . .

MR: The halftime?

PD: Halftimes of the plays.

MR: Oh, the intermission.

PD: Yeah, what's the word?

MR: The intermission?

PD: Intermission, yeah, of the, and I, you know, we used to have fairs to make money, you know, for the clubs. Like the M Club, they had the M Club and the M R Club for the boys and girls that were athletic, and of course they'd have a Latin Club and that stuff. I never took Latin, I didn't seem to be interested in Latin. But they'd have a fair once a year and, you know, I'd work hard on that, putting in booths and things like that. And mostly I worked during my high school years for my father, helping him in the store. Before I could do much helping I'd just be there so that, keep my eye on the customers so they didn't walk off with the store. That was after school. I loved being with my father, I didn't see him at home, he was always working, so I'd go down there and sit and visit with him down there, at the store. I'm glad I did that now

because he died early.

MR: And you also mentioned that during high school, you mentioned off the tape that during high school you began to get more interested in politics. And, how did that come about?

PD: I don't know what happened that made me take an interest. You know, I love my country and somebody had to run it. And I decided that I'd try to figure out who would best run it, and I figured it's like a family: you have to have a leader, and in order to have a good leader, you had to know who were choosing, and I just took an interest for some reason. Why, I don't know.

MR: You were also talking about, off the tape, Al Smith and his (*unintelligible word*)?

PD: Uh-hunh, Al Smith came along and, at that time I think because there'd never, they would mention there'd never been a Catholic president. And I was Catholic and naturally you're interested in your own, and I thought why not try this fellow, see if he will do some good. And so I fin-, that's when I really got a little idea of working or thinking about politics. I wore his little button, you know, they had little buttons. I couldn't vote, but I, wasn't he running against Hoover? I'm quite sure it was Hoover. Whoever he was running against. But I had that little button that, somebody gave me the button and I wore that, and I couldn't vote but I was wearing a button. And when Muskie was running, I had, my mother lived on the main street and it was a nice spot for a sign because it was close to the voting place but far enough away so it was loud, close to the church. And he had a nice big sign there and somebody tore it down. Well that got under my skin so I went down and I patched the darn thing up again. And I'm patching it up and somebody's driving down the road and said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well I'm putting this sign together again." He said, "What are you doing that for?" I said, "Well, Muskie is a good man. That's why I'm doing it." But, you know, you ran into things like that. I suppose he didn't think I should be doing that for Muskie, I don't know, but there was a lot of that, for the Democrats, signs being torn and destroyed at one time. I don't see it now, but it was being done.

MR: Speaking of that, what was the main, or if there was a dominant political affiliation, what was the dominant political affiliation of the town when you were growing up? Were most people Republicans or most of them Democrats?

PD: Most, I think this was mostly a Democratic town because there was a lot of French speaking and they seemed to lean that way at the time. I don't know that it's that way now, I don't think it is. I don't know how we stand now really, because I'm not into it like I was, you know. I was a clerk at the booth, the voting, at the elections. I'm still on the list but they don't call me any more because they have others that are younger than I am that probably need to work, you know, the money. They do pay a little bit now, where earlier they paid very little.

MR: And what did you do after you graduated high school?

PD: I worked for a few years and then got married, when I was twenty-one. Worked as a waitress for three years, four years, and then I still worked after I was married a little bit, waitress work. Then I went into the mill. No; then I went working for First National Stores, and while I was working there somebody asked me if I wanted a job in the mill and I said I'd like

one, yes; so I got a job in the mill. They told me to go and apply and I went and applied and got a job in the mill. And I worked there in the payroll department and tech specialties department, which is a lab. And finally when I was in the lab there was a fellow that the mill had sponsored, four years of college, and he was coming back, so they were going to give me another job, replace me with this young man. And I thought, well, my two children, one of my, my son went through three years of college and he wanted to get married, so he got married. And my daughter didn't want college or nursing, so I thought what am I working for? I'm taking somebody's job, somebody that might need it. And I was tired of learning new jobs. I worked a little while when the computers first come in in the mill, but somebody else, they chose somebody else to go in the computer job. So I thought, I'm learning all these jobs and being bounced around and I just got tired of it, didn't have to work really, so I got done. And while I was working, I did quit my job, I was weighing paper; that was a man's job, during the war. I wanted to go out, my husband was in California, and I wanted to be with him while he was out there, so I had, I quit my job then, went out with him for five and a half months, thought he was going to be shipped out so I came home. Then I went back in the mill again.

MR: And what are some of your experiences working in the mill, and maybe with a focus on your observations of how the workers were treated and what the management was like, and maybe their political affiliations, things like that?

PD: During the war I think the people had the upper hand. There was a shortage of help, and they pretty much, you know, were treated well. But they always pooh-poohed the, of course the. I never belonged to a union because I always worked in a salary job, and so I don't really know a lot about how they were treated. Apparently they weren't treated too badly, except a few times when they had strikes. Of course my husband was working in the mill when they were on strike, but he never talked too much about any of the problems with the mill.

MR: And actually, while we're on the subject of your husband, what's your husband's name?

PD: Everett, Everett C. Dawson.

MR: And what have his occupations been, or what have his . . . ?

PD: Well he was working on a pa-, he was managing. When he first started he managed a A&P grocery store, and then he had his own little sporting goods store, he and his brother. And during the winter things were a little slow so he decided to get a job in the mill and, to carry him through the winter and put some stock on the shelf. And he, he and his brother, he was going to work one winter and have his brother work the second winter, just because it was slow and they could put more stock on the shelf. Well, come time for the brother to work in the mill, he didn't want to go in, so my husband stayed with it and he worked there for about thirty years I guess. Ended up retiring from the mill.

MR: And how would you describe his political interests and attitudes?

PD: Well he is, he doesn't speak much about it. He's Democrat. But he's kind of low keyed. I'm the one that gets a little involved.

MR: Okay, and getting back to your time in the mill, we were talking about, off the tape, some of, I think it was the time that Muskie came in when he was campaigning, (*unintelligible word*) your office.

PD: Well, I can see that they wouldn't, or I could see and also was told that they wouldn't allow him into the time office, you know, and then later on I, this other fellow, I don't know, can't remember who was running, this was governorship I think. And I can't remember, I don't think it was Reed. Do you remember who he was running against?

MR: I remember in '54 he was running against Burt Cross, but I forget who he ran against in '56, it was not Cross [Willis A. "Bill" Trafton].

PD: One of his opponents, and I'm sorry I can't think of his name, but anyway he was allowed to come in and be, have somebody escort him through the mill. And I thought, gee, they didn't allow Muskie to do that, I didn't think that was right.

MR: Well, actually, was this, I'm sorry, was this John Sullivan you had said before?

PD: I'm quite sure it was John Sullivan that showed him through the mill. I may be wrong on that, but, because it was a lot of years ago, but I think it was John Sullivan who showed him through the mill.

MR: Oh, John Sullivan was a member of management at the mill; he wasn't the candidate.

PD: Well, he probably was a supervisor or a boss of some kind. And, you know, he was allowed to go through the mill and shake hands with the workers and, you know, this I kind of felt was wrong. I know it was wrong. Muskie was a hometown boy, he should have been allowed to do that.

MR: Okay. Actually, let's talk a little bit about your own political involvement in the Democratic Party and how that started as, how you got involved in the Democratic Party itself, because you mentioned you were county committee secretary at one point?

PD: I don't know, it's just that I was that interested in politics and my own party, and figured if, you know, the party's going to work you've got to have somebody there to do, to listen and to show that you're interested. And I used to show up to all the meetings that they had. And at one time they were quite active, but right now I don't know that there's any action. I went to a meeting not long ago where they acted like they were going to do something. And they're supposed to have a table at the Dixfield sidewalk fair or something, and I haven't heard anything about it; don't even know if they're going to have it. You don't see anything in the paper on it, and it's supposed to be this month some time. I, matter of fact I had a card out here, I was going to call Bruce Bryant who's a, right now a representative, to see what's cooking with it, you know, instead of informing us. They wanted us to save anything that we could for a sale down, to put on that table, and I've got things lined up here and I don't even know if they're going to have it. My sister and I each gave five dollars so they could pay for the table, and, because I

guess it costs ten dollars a table, and we haven't heard anything. I was going to call Bruce's house, I did but I couldn't get an answer at one time, so I'm going to call again. But that's, you know, you don't get any, you go to the meetings and you don't get any feedback on it, as to what's going on. And just recently, well maybe I'll talk about this after this taping.

MR: Was Democratic County Committee secretary, was that the only official position that you've held in the Democratic Party?

PD: Uh-huh.

MR: And, do you remember what period that was, roughly what period?

PD: That's when, when Mitchell was running. He used to come up, he came up and spoke at one of our meetings. Oh gosh, I don't know, there's been so many years pass since, I don't remember what year.

MR: That's fine.

PD: I'm not one that remembers dates, even though I love ancient history. I, don't ask me about a date, but I'm interested in all these old buildings. I went to Rome and I couldn't get over it, how mind boggling it was, you know, ancient stuff.

MR: Yeah, I'm interested in that myself actually.

PD: Catacombs and all that, just fascinated me.

MR: Okay, who were some of the people in the Democratic County Committee that you were involved with? You mentioned a couple off the tape?

PD: Yeah, Emile Frasier and Don O'Leary, MacDonald, oh, what's his name, Leo MacDonald, Ida Luther, who else, got to be some more there. Not many women, sorry to say. One while there they were pushing women, they wanted women to run. That was a. They stressed that at some of our meetings, to get the women out to run for office. And there were a few that, I can't remember their names even, that were quite interested, and I think they probably did get into politics, that came to our meetings, they were from out of town, political women. But as far as the town went, I don't know.

MR: Okay. And what were, what specifically were your responsibilities as secretary in the county committee?

PD: Well, just to, you know, record the meetings and where they'd be held and the time and place, and if there's any speakers. Pretty much what any recording secretary would take care of.

MR: Did you have much contact with the state legislature or legislators through this connection?

PD: No, no.

MR: Did you have any contact with. . . ?

PD: Well, you know, my own, yeah. Like Don O'Leary was in the senate, you know, people from town. But as far as anybody from out of town, Augusta, period, no. At one time we went down to visit the State House and had our picture taken with Ken Curtis, my sister and I. I forget what we went to Augusta for at that time, but got a picture of ourselves with Ken Curtis.

MR: Did you ever have any contact with Muskie through your work in the Democratic county committee?

PD: No, and I'm sorry I didn't. I don't know, he seemed to be in my mind a, he seemed such a giant to me. What would he have in common with me, I felt, you know, except that he worked for me. But I thought he should be spending more of, you know, his time with somebody more important than I was in government. I mean, I was never in government anyway, but he was always. I was in awe of him and I don't know, I'd love to, you know, gotten closer to him, but he was at a distance. But I, but I guess I put him on a pedestal, I really did.

MR: Did you ever meet him or talk with him at any length?

PD: No, he's just somebody that I admired and would have worked for had he asked me to. In my own way, I sent a little bit of money to him when he was campaigning. I got a card from him thanking me and just written Ed on it. And, just at a distance, but I admired him.

MR: Okay, well I guess before we get off the subject of the Democratic Party committee, you were talking also about, on the tape, the demise, or at least the decline of that committee in the county, and some of your reasons that you thought that happened. Would you like to talk about that a little bit?

PD: Well, at a meeting they'd have plans to do a certain thing. And next thing you know, that was canceled, nobody told me about it, nobody wrote or called to tell me there was a cancellation of anything. And it sort of got mixed up. And I didn't know what was going on and why they didn't involve me, you know. It was my job and things that were brought up at the meeting were not followed through, and it just got to be mixed up.

MR: Okay, well let's talk a little bit about your relationship with Lucia Cormier, who was in the state house of representatives the same time that Muskie was in the forties. How did you get to know her, first of all?

PD: I knew her as a businesswoman. I went into her shop; she had gift shop and a bookstore. And I, I knew she was a teacher of course, and after teaching she did go into this. And I used to shop there and got acquainted with her, and of course she was, she and my brother-in-law were good friends in that my brother-in-law's father was in the house of representatives and knew we were both Democrats and working for the party in Rumford. So through my brother-in-law I got a little more acquainted with her, and she used to invite us down to her Cape Elizabeth place.

And then when she retired and went to Daytona, we visited her down there. She had a party for, I can't remember, it was somebody in her apartment down there in Daytona, and she invited anybody in Daytona that was from Maine that she knew to this party. And socially I knew her after she went into politics.

MR: And she talked about Ed, you said, when she was involved in the state house of representatives. What were some of the stories she'd tell you about, well, her work in general in the State House? And also her work with Ed Muskie?

PD: Well, she didn't discuss Muskie a lot except, you know, that story I told you about with the pressing his suit so he'd look nice for the next appearance, wherever it was. She sort of, I don't know that you'd say she mothered him or not, but she sort of looked out for him in that way.

MR: And would she talk with you much about her own interests and political goals while she was working in the state house of representatives?

PD: Oh, she, I knew that she was, you know, strictly Democrat, as I was, and, but she didn't dwell on it. But she, you know, she of course knew Muskie and followed Muskie all the way and thought he was a wonderful man.

MR: Okay, I guess a general question about the community, the Mexico-Rumford community. How do you think it's changed? I mean economically, ethnically, politically, over the years that you've been living here?

PD: I really don't, hadn't thought too much about it but it sure has changed. I'd like to know what caused the change. I think, you know, they did, it used to be strictly a Democratic town. And they divided the town of Rumford, half of them are voting in one district and half in another part of it. I don't know that I would say strictly half but part of Rumford is in one voting, what do you call it?

MR: Is it a ward (*unintelligible phrase*)?

PD: Ward, yeah. So, you know, it split Rumford, so I think the Dem-, the Republicans are benefiting because they seem to be winning now, where it used to be strictly Democrat. But I do think that the Republicans stick together, they work together, and they get things done, where the Democrats are kind of laying back.

MR: Okay, actually I'm going to flip the tape here.

End of Side A
Side B

MR: This is the second side of the interview with Pauline Dawson on August 11th, 1999, the time is quarter of twelve. And we were just about to talk about how you think Rumford has changed, or the Rumford-Mexico community has changed economically.

PD: The way I feel about is the mill is downsizing, the town is smaller. I know Mexico, there's many retired people carrying the load, paying the taxes. In, the mill seems, if they hired, seems like if they hire somebody from out of town that's not living here, they're not spending their money here. They're taking their money out of town and spending it elsewhere, so the town is being hurt from it. You'll notice that the stores are closing, and it really, and there's a lot of older people. Young people have to go elsewhere to work. Mostly elderly. And it makes you sad because you don't have your family with you, your family is elsewhere, especially as you get older. Used to be that families were, stayed together until they died. But today the elderly are left alone, their children are away. It's kind of a sad situation for the elderly. And I think for the young people, too, because a lot of them would like to stay here in this area, but there's, the job market isn't what it should be. I don't know what else has changed, that, but I think that's the big change.

MR: Well is there anything that we haven't talked about that you'd like to add, maybe about your own political interests or things that you've noticed about the community, or politics in Maine?

PD: No, I'm not too well acquainted with the schools anymore, I know they're important and I hope they're working well in this town. I think there's nothing more important than the schools, provided you have the right teachers. And being elderly, you're kind of in a cocoon; you're not out there with the mainstream. I like to think I am, I get, you know, involved once in a while with the town things, but, historical society and a few other things, but I don't know. I don't know if all of us elderly feel the same as I do or not. I still think it could get better, hopefully.

MR: Okay, well just a general question: what do you think Muskie's effects and legacy for Maine and Maine politics have been?

PD: I think he's one of the, probably the only one that's affected this town in any big way. I can't think of anything more important than the air and the water and the land, and he worked hard for all of us so we'd have a better life. He, I hope that, you know, it's not easy, I know the river is cleaner, and I hope that, you know, they're still checking on it to make sure it stays that way.

MR: Okay, well I don't think I've got any more questions, actually, so if you're all set then, thanks a lot for your time, I appreciate it.

PD: Oh, you're welcome.

End of Interview