

5-24-1999

Flanagan, David oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

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Interview with David Flanagan by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Flanagan, David

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

May 24, 1999

Place

Augusta, Maine

ID Number

MOH 098

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Biographical Note

David Flanagan was born in Bangor, Maine on June 30, 1947. He grew up in Bangor, Hampden, then, Portland where he attended Deering High School. He was the eldest of eight children. His mother, Constance Flanagan, was a registered nurse, and his father, Thomas Flanagan, was an insurance claims adjuster for the USF&G Company. His family was Catholic. He attended Harvard University where he studied history and government, and then went on to the University of London, Kings College, to get a master's degree, and returned to Boston College Law School on a scholarship. He worked on the congressional campaign of Peter Kyros, Sr., and did some work for Elmer Violette and Governor Curtis. At the time of the interview he was running as an Independent candidate for Governor of Maine.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: the death of Clinton Clauson; ethnic diversity in Portland in the 1960s; economy in Maine in the 1960s and major companies that dominated it; debating opportunities at Deering High School; teenage Democrats at Deering High School; work on Peter Kyros, Sr.'s Congressional campaign; Governor Brennan; impressions and general recollections of Muskie; and Muskie as founder of modern anti-pollution era.

Indexed Names

Billings, Leon
Brennan, Joseph E.
Brownell, William
Buxton, Anthony Wayne “Tony”
Clauson, Clinton Amos, 1895-1959
Conley, Gerry
Curtis, Kenneth M., 1931-
Eisenhower, Dwight D. (Dwight David), 1890-1969
Erwin, Clark
Fitzgerald, Buzz
Flanagan, David
Ford, Gerald R., 1913-
Isaacson, George
Johnson, Lyndon B. (Lyndon Baines), 1908-1973
Kelley, Peter
Kennedy, Jacqueline O.
Kennedy, John F. (John Fitzgerald), 1917-1963
Kennedy, Robert F., 1925-1968
Kyros, Peter N., Jr.
Kyros, Peter N., Sr.
La Folette, Robert
Lessard, Al
Lowry, Don
Martin, John
Micoleau, Charlie
Mitchell, George J. (George John), 1933-
Muskie, Edmund S., 1914-1996
Nixon, Richard M. (Richard Milhous), 1913-1994
O’Leary, John
Redmond, David “Dave”
Reed, John
Ring, Elizabeth
Roosevelt, Franklin D. (Franklin Delano), 1882-1945
Ross, Nancy
Scribner, Rod
Shettleworth, Earle G., Jr.
Stilfin, Arthur
Sudstrupp, Kirk
Tierney, James
Violette, Elmer
Webster, Mary

Transcript

Andrea L’Hommedieu: This is an interview with David Flanagan conducted by Andrea L’Hommedieu on May 24th, 1999 in his office at CMP in Augusta, Maine. Mr. Flanagan, would you tell me your full name and spell it?

David Flanagan: My name is David Thomas Flanagan, F-L-A-N-A-G-A-N.

AL: And where and when were you born?

DF: I was born in Bangor, Maine on June 28th, 1947.

AL: And where did you grow up?

DF: I grew up in Bangor until I was in about the, oh, fourth grade, and then I moved, or sixth grade, and then I moved to Hampden and was down there for a few years, and then moved to Portland where I went to high school.

AL: And what are the names of your parents and siblings?

DF: My parents’ names are Thomas and Constance Flanagan, and I have seven brothers and sisters: Terrence, Paula, Martha, Nora, Peter, Lisa, and Mark, and I sure hope I didn’t forget anybody.

AL: And what is your place in the family?

DF: First.

AL: You’re the oldest?

DF: Yes.

AL: What were your parents’ occupations?

DF: My mother was a registered nurse, although with that many kids she devoted herself full-time to raising the family. And my father was an insurance claims adjustor for the USF&G Company.

AL: And what were their social and religious beliefs and their political beliefs?

DF: I would say that they did not express any great political beliefs one way or another until the war in Vietnam when my mother became quite adverse to the war because she had a whole bunch of draft age kids. And I was raised as a Catholic.

AL: What were your parents’ relationships with different groups in the community, family, and ethnic and economic?

DF: It was really a self-contained family unit; it looked inwards. They really didn't have a lot of time for outside activities. And I know my father always had a feeling that the veterans' organizations (he was a veteran of WWII), didn't really do a good job of representing the true interests of the rank and file veterans and didn't have much to do with them. So they really didn't have a lot of interaction.

AL: How do you feel that your family affected you as you grew up?

DF: Well I wouldn't be here without them, would I? I think that they were always interested in the intellectual development of the kids and wanted to have a very stimulating environment for discussion of issues and, you know, current events and things like that. And they made every effort to give us every opportunity they could within their limited means to take advantage of educational opportunities.

AL: Did they ever discuss politics at the dinner table?

DF: The kids did, not the parents, and, except as I say, my mother became somewhat radicalized by the war. But we had lots of discussions, but it really was primarily among my siblings.

AL: Were you all fairly close in age?

DF: Impossible with that number of people. No, I, my youngest brother is twenty years younger than I am. We never lived in the same household.

AL: What were some of the other influences on you besides your family unit on you as you were growing up?

DF: Well I'm sure that teachers were. In particular, in Hampden I had a school teacher, a Mrs. Stanley whose husband was very active in Republican politics and later served on the Maine Public Utilities Commission. And she even at that early age of my political consciousness back in 1957-58, I was getting conservative, rural, traditional Maine Republican ideas from her. Then when I was in high school in Portland, I had a wonderful teacher named Elizabeth Ring who was a noted Maine historian. And Miss Ring had a great deal of influence on a number of students not just at Deering but at other schools around and had a much more liberal, open, progressive agenda than I had experienced in Hampden.

AL: Would you probably say Bangor was your hometown?

DF: Yes.

AL: What was it like when you were growing up politically?

DF: Oh, well, I really, I left Bangor about the time, when I was ten years old, about the time that I was beginning to read the papers and that sort of thing. Oh, you asked about influences. I should also say that I had a grandfather who was a truck driver for Railway Express and a

member of a, one of the railroad brotherhoods, but whose personal political views were quite conservative. And he was the one who first got me reading newspapers and news magazines. And literally it was when I was, it was at the time of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 so I was nine years old. And he thought it was time I started being aware of the world.

AL: Well then tell me from your perspective what Portland was like politically?

DF: Portland at, when I was a teenager, I think was, had ended the era of Republican domination and I think representatives were being elected at large rather than by districts, and the Democrats were taking the whole delegation. And there was a lot of, it was the era of, you know, after the death of President Kennedy and the Johnson, during the Johnson presidency and the war, there was a lot of people starting to get interested in politics; a lot of activity.

AL: At that time also, Ed Muskie was governor, the first Democratic governor in twenty some-odd years. Were you aware of him?

DF: Yeah, he, yeah, I was sort of aware of him although that was, I think his term ended in '58 didn't it? So, again, that's just, you know, I was aware of him. One of the first things I remember though is the death of Clinton Clauson as of course being a big major news event. And, you know, I think John Reed was the first governor that I really had a sense of.

AL: What was the ethnic make-up of Portland?

DF: I, I went to Deering High School and I had a lot of friends at Chevrus and the sense I had was that the place was, you know, half Irish-Catholic and half Jewish. But I later came to appreciate that there were actually other groups in our community. And, but I think that it's fair to say that it was, the dominant political force was Irish and the ethnic-make up was probably, I don't know, split between Yankees and Irish primarily. And, while Jewish people were so prominent as leaders in the community, the numbers really weren't there. And I never had a sense that there was much, there were many French people, even though Westbrook and the mill were right next door. And Maine has, obviously, what, about twenty percent of the population is of Canadian heritage, Franco-American heritage. There were also a number of people with Italian names in, at Deering and in Portland and I suppose that ethnic group constituted a significant part of the community. And then a few Armenians and this and that stirred in for good measure.

AL: What industries provided the jobs locally?

DF: In the 1960s? Well I think that S.D. Warren dominated the economy of the area. And beyond that I think Union Mutual and Blue Cross and some, you know, white collar office-type operations in Portland were probably the second most significant employers.

AL: When and where did you meet your wife?

DF: I met my wife at the Portland police station. I was working as a law student in the office of the county attorney Joe Brennan at the time, and I had a good friend who was the first female

juvenile police officer in the city of Portland. And she had a friend she thought I would like, and so she introduced us. And as it happened it was at the police station, which was probably a symbolic sort of thing.

AL: Has she shared your involvement in politics or community affairs?

DF: She's very deeply involved in community affairs, not so much in politics. But for example right now she's vice chairman of the Board of Catholic Charities of Maine, she's on the board of the new psychiatric hospital that is succeeding Jackson Brook, and she's the president of the children's center for disabled kids up here and has been very active in the United Way. And she has a long list of that kind of community and civic involvement.

AL: You told me a little bit about your secondary education. What were your experiences like in school?

DF: In high school?

AL: High school.

DF: I was primarily involved with debating and so I feel very fortunate. I was part of a, you know, a small cadre of kids at Deering that had a chance to meet and interact with like-minded people elsewhere in the state. So that in those years I got to know a lot of people who have been, you know, you'd see again at Boy's State and then in Democratic politics or politics in general, and many people who are still good friends of mine. For example, John O'Leary who's now the U.S. Ambassador to Chile was on the debating team for Chevrus, and Clark Erwin who was later the business writer for the Portland paper was from Westbrook, and Jim Tierney who is attorney general here was from Brunswick High School. And, so there were a lot of people that, George Isaacson up in Auburn who is now the attorney for L.L. Bean's and a community, leader and Nancy Ross who was the head of the Maine Organic Farmers was from Thornton Academy. So a lot of people that, we formed our own little world I guess and had people like Elizabeth Ring as coaches and mentors. And it was a wonderful experience.

AL: Besides the connections you made from debating, what were some of the skills that you feel you brought away from that?

DF: I think it was the best part of my education in high school. As I look back on it I think learning how to drive, learning how to type, learning how to speak a little French, and being involved in debating were probably the most useful things that I got out of school. And what in particular about debating was valuable was the concept of advancing a proposition, supporting it with facts, and documenting the facts. Seems pretty elementary but until you do it for a while, it's not quite so natural as you might think.

AL: And Elizabeth Ring was part of that officially?

DF: Oh yeah, yeah, she was the coach for the Deering team and a good friend of Brooks Quimby up at Bates, who I guess was the state mastermind of all this stuff. And Miss Ring put

us through our paces in terms of getting our arguments together and anticipating arguments from the other side and, you know, just trying to open up our minds. She was, I think she, she was old enough that she was able to vote in the first election that women could vote for President. And she supported Robert La Follette, the progressive from Wisconsin, and was very proud to her dying day of that.

AL: Where did you go to college?

DF: Harvard College.

AL: And what did you study as a major?

DF: Oh, history and government and the usual things.

AL: And then you went on to law school?

DF: Yeah, I went, actually after I got out of college I had the great good fortune of not having to go into the Army which I thought I was going to have to. And at the last minute, or at the draft board physical they said, "No, thanks." So there I was in August with no plans because I really thought I was going to go. And so I quickly applied to a program over at the University of London at Kings College, which was very inexpensive. And so I went over there for a year and traveled around Europe and got an M.A. And then I came back, poor as a church mouse, and went to Boston College Law School on a scholarship.

AL: During the time from high school until you graduated from law school, did any of that education or the experiences in England change your outlook, your attitudes or your beliefs? Did they further shape them or change them?

DF: Oh yeah, for sure. And two things, one was being exposed to an awful lot of students from very different backgrounds but by and large quite able people, and getting, this is the first time I really had any sense of the economy, and, you know, what it took to make up the economy on the one hand. And on the other hand, I went off to school idealistically supportive of our policy in Vietnam as trying to, you know, keep people out of the clutches of totalitarianism, and over the years became more and more concerned about how American policy was being conducted. And that was, you know, that just deteriorated every year until the damn thing was finally over.

AL: Can you tell me when did you begin your political involvement and go ahead and give me sort of a chronology?

DF: Sure. I, let me see, I remember seeing Richard Nixon, I remember seeing President Eisenhower out at Dow Air Force Base when he came up to Maine for a fishing trip; that was pretty exciting. And then I, later on I saw Richard Nixon speaking at the Bangor Auditorium in the 1960 campaign. And then when I was at high school, the same kinds of people that were involved with debating were involved with politics, including a guy a year behind me at Deering named Peter Kyros, Jr. whose father was at that point running for Cong-, or soon there afterwards running for congress.

So I got involved, well let's see, even before then. In 1964, along with some of my friends, we founded something called the Teenage Democrats or, I don't know, I guess it was, there were other chapters around the state, but we got interested in that. And I remember going down to the '64 National Democratic Convention in Atlantic City which, with Alton Lessard who was at that time the U.S. attorney from Maine. And (*aside - oh, hi Arthur. Tape stopped*) . . . had this little organization of Teenage Democrats in the greater Portland area and so I went down to the, I went down to the convention in Atlantic City with our U.S. attorney. And I'll never forget it; he had a huge Cadillac and it was I think just the two of us, or maybe Earle Shettleworth who's now the head of the state Historic Preservation Commission was with us, and he went rocketing down those highways at eighty miles an hour. And the reason, he did this with impunity because he had a little placard on his dashboard that said "United States Attorney, Official Business," And apparently Attorney General Kennedy had made arrangements for this kind of thing because of the trouble U.S. attorneys and law enforcement officers were having down south because of the civil rights movement. Alton turned this into his personal advantage.

Anyway, what an experience that was. I'm not sure I've been through anything as emotional ever again in my life. I mean, I met, there was a long receiving line but I shook hands with Jackie Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy. When Robert Kennedy spoke it was, it was just overwhelming and he got a tremendous ovation. I've never, never heard anything like it again. And the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was there contesting the regular segregated delegation which was the first I think national political manifestation of the civil rights movement. And with Senator Muskie so central to what was going on, there was more attention paid to the Maine delegation than would usually be the case. And it was, it was just a tremendous, tremendous experience for a, you know, a kid from Portland, Maine who'd never been anywhere before.

So that's my earliest recollection of my personal involvement with politics. And let's see, that was '64. Then in '66 my friends Peter Kyros, Jr. and John O'Leary and I worked on the "Kyros for Congress" campaign for his father. And that was pretty all-consuming at the time. And also I did some work for Elmer Violette who was running for the Senate. I mean, worked for, I just drove him around and things like that, and Governor Curtis. I got to, got acquainted with a lot of people who, many of whom are still friends of mine. And so that's how I got started.

AL: What sorts of things did you do on the Peter Kyros, Sr. campaign?

DF: Oh, everything from simply driving him around to different campaign stops to writing stuff for him to say and making arrangements. I think Gerry Conley, Sr. was sort of our patron and we sort of worked under his general direction, but there was a lot of activity and a lot of serious involvement. And Peter, Jr. was, you know, he had a mind for the, taking care of the business side of things for his father and making all the arrangements for the bumper stickers and all the paraphernalia of a campaign. And John was, who is a very talented writer, did a lot of that work for him. And, I don't know, the three of us seemed to be fairly central in that campaign.

AL: Were there certain people you met during those early years politically that had a big influence on you? You said some of them you still know, were there ones in particular that . . .

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DF: Yeah, I think Gerry Conley. Well certainly Peter Kyros, Sr. was a, had a big impact. I, then I, I was impressed by the quality of his mind, but I soon came to have doubts about his, the depth of his convictions. But, you know, it was certainly, it was certainly a great learning experience to have spent some time with him. And Peter, and Gerry Conley became a friend of mine back then. And through him I met Joe Brennan, with whom I've been associated ever since, and Governor Curtis and some of the people around Governor Curtis, you know.

AL: Could you give me some recollections of your time in politics? Did you, were you involved further than just that campaign?

DF: Oh yeah, sure, then I, let's see, that was '66. I worked for Congressman Kyros after he got elected the following summer in '67 and, down in Washington, and then I. . . I didn't like that; I didn't like the way things were handled. So I dropped out of that and in fact I think the next year I stayed in Cambridge and didn't come home to work, the next two years. And so, and then the next year after that I was in England and so I didn't get back involved in Maine politics until I started law school.

And as I say, I worked in the county attorney's office and got to know Joe Brennan and George Mitchell who was an assistant county attorney, and Don Lowry and a number of other people who, Arthur Stilfin, who were involved with that office and went on to do other things politically. And then, and then Brennan changed from county attorney to running for the state Senate and became minority leader. And I went up there, even though I was still in law school (this was not a smart move), and worked as his and the whole Democratic, the whole giant Democratic senate delegation (which was eleven people), as their administrative assistant, which was a position that had just been created that session. The president, the speaker and the majority and the minority leaders in each house would have political assistants. And I met a number of interesting people through that. Tony Buxton was working for John Martin, the house speaker, and Bill Brownell who's now the U.S. clerk of courts down in Portland, was working for the president of the senate, and Mary Webster who later was on the PUC was working for the majority leader.

So I was very much involved in politics through that session and then Brennan ran for governor in the Democratic primary against George Mitchell and Peter Kelley. And I worked as the, basically as the press secretary and issues person on that campaign. And then after that, after doing some modest amount of work on Senator Mitchell's campaign for governor I guess I didn't do anything again until '78 when Brennan ran again and I was just a general supporter of his. I was in private practice at that point; didn't do anything particularly special on that campaign. And then I've worked for him when he was governor as chief of staff. Or in, I was, my title was legal counsel but under the Brennan way of organizing things I guess I was as close to a chief of staff as he had.

AL: Did he have a different way of organizing than some of the other governors?

DF: He did, he did; he didn't like people to have fancy titles and official positions. He had a

very sensible way of organizing things. Brennan basically set up a tripartite system where Dave Redmond sort of headed political issues and appointments, and Kirk Studstrup who's now a judge headed up pure administration and I did issues. (*Telephone interruption - That's my private line, too.*) So that, so he basically had it divided that way, and then his method of operation was I think sort of like what I've read about Franklin D. Roosevelt's. He liked to have people expressing adversarial points of view with him sort of sitting back and acting as a judge. So that it was very common for him to have, oh, one of the commissioners come in and make the case for whatever project or budget item he wanted to do, and then have either me or Kirk or Rod Scribner who was our commissioner of finance there to say, "Well, yeah that's a good idea but, here are the following eight problems with it," or, to get into some kind of discussion. And then Brennan would, you know, he would intercede at appropriate places but he was looking for other people to sort of test out and challenge ideas. And I thought it was a pretty good way of doing things.

AL: So, what next? Where did you become involved after that?

DF: Let's see. I left Brennan after five years, after his reelection, his triumphant reelection I must say. And other than being on, you know, giving money to the Democrats and being on the 500 Club and that kind of thing, I really haven't had much official involvement directly. But I've certainly, you know, supported candidates, various candidates in every election. Except this last time for governor I couldn't, I couldn't bring myself to do that.

AL: I know you told me before the interview that you didn't know Senator Muskie very well. But you must have had some connections with him over the years, or at least gotten some impressions of him. Could you talk to me a little bit about that?

DF: Yeah, when you called I was, well when I got your questionnaire I was thinking about that. And my earliest recollection of dealing with Senator Muskie was once when I was in high school, (so it would have been before '65), I was down in his office in Washington. And he had this magazine down there about, that was put out by the Polish government, and, because of course he was of Polish ancestry. And I said to him, I said, "Jeez, what are you doing with this, you know, Communist propaganda in your office?" And he got really angry and he started off on the tack of saying that, well, Poland, (this is sort of the same problem Gerry Ford had), that Poland really wasn't Communist, and that didn't work very well. So he really, he just got mad and I think people who. . . . You know, I was just an innocent high school kid being wiser than I should have been I'm sure, and, but I got exposed to the famous Muskie temper right off the bat. And I've known him ever since until his death. And of course I had enormous respect for him for not only what he did on environmental leadership and taking over the State Department when it was in a shambles, but I think in his later years his involvement up here, his sincere, genuine involvement up here on legal aid for the poor, you know, that's something that ought to be in his memorial as well.

AL: Are there others that you can remember that were involved politically that you think might be good sources for this project, people who could give us?

DF: Well, you know, just thinking, I was just thinking about Muskie being Secretary of State,

and I had a chance to tour the State Department when he was down there. And the woman who conducted the tour was Buzzy Fitzgerald's sister, you know, she's since died. And Buzzy might have some good observations because I know he was close with his sister. He might, and I know he knew Senator Muskie in his own right, too, of course.

AL: He is president or former president of Bath Iron Works?

DF: Uh-hmm. And, let's see, I just saw Charlie Micoleau Friday night; I assume you've nailed him, he was very close. Did you talk, have you talked with Leon Billings?

AL: Don Nicoll has.

DF: Okay.

AL: Being someone who has lived in Maine for the majority of your lifetime, what do you think Senator Muskie's greatest accomplishment was for the state? Was it political or environmental or . . . ?

DF: Well, I think, I think probably when the last word is written, he will have to be identified as being the founder of the modern anti-pollution era and really getting industry to have to meet some basic standards for industrial cleanliness, and the beginning of the effort to clean up the waters and the air of the state, of the nation. I think Maine, I can well imagine why somebody from Rumford would be particularly interested in this issue. But I think Maine was probably less environmentally polluted than a lot of the rest of the country. But nonetheless we have benefited a great deal from the improvements in the environment. I remember when I was a kid the rivers were clogged with pulp logs and weren't available for any other use, and now that's changed. So that, I know it's trite to say that, but that's probably going to be the longest term benefit.

I think that the way he rose to national leadership was of general benefit to the state of Maine. You know, here we are with, what, three-tenths of one percent of the nation's population and we wouldn't hardly have been noticed if it hadn't been for Senator Muskie's very prominent position in Washington. And I'm sure that helped with a lot of, just basically getting a lot of wherewithal up here from the federal government. And finally I think his, his race for Vice President and then as a presidential candidate reflected great credit on the state of Maine. And, you know, it's intangible but I think [it] made us something more than just vacation land, and that was positive, too.

AL: Have I missed anything in my questions that you would like to add about you and your times and your connections?

DF: No, I don't think so. I think that, I think, well I'll tell you one recollection I have that I think speaks to Senator Muskie is that in his later years he would host events for the Democratic Party down at his house. And he was, in Kennebunkport, and he was unselfish in making that resource and himself available. And it really, it was a wonderful thing. I remember Governor Brennan observing to me once that there are very few states where you could go to a function at

the seaside and meet the Secretary of State of the United States, an up-and-coming senator, the governor and other leaders of the state and have a lobster and do it all for fifty bucks. And, you know, I think, you know, that ethic of public access to leaders who really meant something, really amounted to something, and being able to have an honest-to-God discussion with them, is something very special about this state. And Senator Muskie was the mentor of us all in that respect.

AL: Thank you very much for your time.

DF: Glad to do it.

End of Interview