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## Nicoll, Don oral history interview

Chris Beam

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## **Interview with Don Nicoll by Chris Beam**

*Summary Sheet and Transcript*

### **Interviewee**

Nicoll, Don

### **Interviewer**

Beam, Chris

### **Date**

December 17, 1991

### **Place**

Portland, Maine

### **ID Number**

MOH 020

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### **Biographical Note**

Donald Eugene "Don" Nicoll was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on August 4, 1927, and grew up in the West Roxbury section of the city. He is the son of George and Mary Nicoll. He attended Robert Gould Shaw Junior High School and Boston English High School and graduated from Colby College in Waterville, Maine in 1949, majoring in History with a minor in Government. Don met his future wife, Hilda Farnum, also a Colby student, when they worked in the resort town of Ocean Park, Maine, in the summer of 1944. Nicoll began his graduate work at Pennsylvania State College in 1949, where he received a teaching fellowship in the Department of History. His graduate studies concentrated on American history, specifically the period from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War. His M.A. (1952) thesis was on the Alien and Sedition Acts.

Starting in 1951, Nicoll and his family settled in Buckfield, Maine where he picked apples and taught part time at Stephen's High School, located in Rumford. Nicoll began working as an announcer for WLAM radio in Lewiston, Maine. He became a reporter and then news editor for WLAM and WLAM-TV. In June 1954, Nicoll left WLAM to become Executive Secretary of the Democratic State Committee at the request of Frank M. Coffin, who has just become chairman. Mr. Coffin was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from Maine's Second Congressional

District in 1956 and Nicoll went to Washington, DC, as his administrative assistant, continuing in that post until December 1960, the end of Congressman Coffin's second term. Mr. Coffin ran for governor in 1960 and was defeated. After the election Senator Edmund S. Muskie asked Nicoll to join his staff as legislative assistant and news secretary. Nicoll served in that position until 1962, when he became administrative assistant. He continued in that post until 1971, when he became personal advisor to Senator Muskie. He left the senate office in mid-1972.

From 1972 until his retirement in 2005 Nicoll worked as a program and policy planner, first as a consultant (1972-73), then as chairman and chief executive officer of the New England Land Grant Universities Joint Operations Committee (1973-1975), then as coordinator of planning and vice president for planning and public affairs for the Maine Medical Center (1975-1986), then as a consultant (1986-2005). His clients were primarily in the non-profit sector and included universities, libraries, education associations, health care organizations and social service agencies. He also worked as a volunteer, heading a variety of public policy projects, including the Maine Task Force on Government Reorganization, the Maine State Compensation Commission, the Maine (Mental Health) Systems Assessment Commission, the Maine Consortium for Health Professions Education, the Southern Maine Community Television Consortium, the Maine Special Commission on Government Reorganization (co-chair), the Board of Visitors of the University of Southern Maine's Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, the Maine-Aomori Sister-State Advisory Council and the Governor's Allagash Wilderness Waterway Working Group.

From 1998-2005, Don Nicoll was the Director of the Edmund S. Muskie Oral History Project at Bates College.

### **Scope and Content Note**

Interview includes discussions of: McCarthy era parallels; lecturers at Colby College; attending Colby College; infighting amongst Democrats; Paul Fullam; liberal Democrats of the 1940s; Scoop Jackson; Ralph Owen Brewster; Sumner Pike; and covering various topics for WLAM.

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## **Transcript**

**Chris Beam:** Okay, this is the second of an oral history interview with Donald E. Nicoll in his office in Portland, Maine on December 17th, 1991, that's a Tuesday beginning at 9:55 AM Don, when we last talked, we got you off to Colby College. I think you were just matriculating. Remind me, what year was that?

**Don Nicoll:** That was 1945.

**CB:** Nineteen forty-five. Okay. And did you have, your career plans were that you intended to be a minister, is that correct?

**DN:** Right.

**CB:** When did that change? When did those plans change?

**DN:** Oh, it probably was in my sophomore year. I became more and more interested in history and government in part because of my advisor, who was the head of the history department, Paul Fullam, and Paul of course later ran for the U.S. Senate in 1954. But it was partially that and partially a feeling on my part, or a growing conviction on my part, that I didn't agree with the theology of the Baptist church in which I had grown up. And I couldn't see myself being a minister preaching things I didn't believe in. And I'd had an interest in history and government in high school, had strong faculty instruction in high school.

**CB:** So what did you ultimately major in?

**DN:** I majored in history and minored in government. In those days it was not called political science, it was called government.

**CB:** Or politics.

**DN:** It was largely politics.

**CB:** Right. Okay, was Fullam your advisor?

**DN:** He was my advisor and chair of the department. He was a, his specialty was American history.

**CB:** And was that your specialty, or was there just a broad history major?

**DN:** Oh, it was a broad history major but my primary interest was American history and I, when I graduated I got a fellowship at Penn State in American history and went there in the fall of '49 and had a one year non-renewable fellowship. It paid a thousand dollars plus fees, and that is, there were no tuition or other student fees, the stipend was a thousand dollars, and for that I taught each semester two sections of freshman American history.

**CB:** That is, you'd give lectures and carry on discussions with the students?

**DN:** Regular teaching load for six hours essentially.

**CB:** Six hours and on top of that you also had graduate course work?

**DN:** Yes, and I finished, by the second short session of the summer of '50 I had finished all of my course work and had started work on my thesis. Curiously enough, the work I did at Penn State, particularly the teaching, I ended up teaching freshman courses both semesters in pre-Civil War American history, so most of my focus ended up being pre-Civil War. And some course

work in European history and some in American history and government post-Civil War, but most of it focused on the pre-Civil War.

**CB:** What was your thesis on?

**DN:** An Intellectual and Social Interpretation of the Alien and Sedition Laws of 1799.

**CB:** What got you interested in that particular topic?

**DN:** That was a period in American history when, that is the, 1949-1950 was a period of very, it was the beginning really of the McCarthy era and a lot of emphasis on dealing with the threats from the left. And I was fascinated by that and in my reading and course work had become fascinated with the period at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century where the United States was struggling for some political identity really. And it was in the wake of, or at the height of the French Revolution and a lot of political and social turmoil in Britain, and you had both the fear of European factionalism as John Adams called it, and a lot of fear of revolutionary thought pervading the society. And that was what led to the Alien and Sedition Laws which were designed to prevent foreign heresies from corrupting the body politic in the United States.

**CB:** Now, was this interest, did this originate at Colby, or was this something, was this a subject you decided on or formulated at Penn State?

**DN:** The topic itself was at Penn State and it was a result of a conference with, my conferences with my advisors there. But the interest in the general issue of political participation, free speech and the political process, it started at Colby largely as a result of studying under Paul Fullam and also a professor of European history, Ossip Flechtheim.

**CB:** Could you spell that?

**DN:** O-S-S-I-P, Flechtheim, F-L-E-C-H-T-H-E-I-M.

**CB:** He was a professor of history or government?

**DN:** History and government, they were all history and government and they tended to teach both kinds of courses. But he was principally European history and . . . .

**CB:** He was German?

**DN:** He was a German Jew who was a refugee from Germany and brought with him of course a real insider's view of what fascism had meant in Germany and Nazis. And he taught a course in intellectual history which I think was very important in stimulating my interest in the connections between social and intellectual movements and the political process and political views. I think all of that fed in to that decision.

**CB:** Let's go back to Colby. Were you politically active when you were an undergraduate? I mean, in any political movement? For example, in 1948 there was the Truman-Dewey contest and Henry Wallace was running on a third party ticket, as well as, there was a Dixie-crat ticket under Strom Thurmond, so, and this is really just at the beginning of, the onset of the Cold War. Did you get active at all politically?

**DN:** No, I remember attending some meetings at which politicians spoke. The one that really sticks in my mind was an appearance by Robert Taft at Colby speaking to a student convocation, introduced by Ralph Owen Brewster, notorious Maine senator, conservative. And I remember speakers coming to the campus; Norman Thomas came and spoke, the head of the Socialist party and the Socialist candidate. They had started at Colby at that time the Gabrielson lectures . . . .

**CB:** Gabrielson?

**DN:** Gabrielson, yeah. It was funded by a man Gabrielson who was a conservative Republican. I think he had connections with Luce, Henry Luce, and I forget the reasons for his making a donation to Colby, but he gave a fairly substantial amount of money that was used to support bringing speakers onto the campus. And I remember, I think Thomas was brought under the Gabrielson lecture series, maybe the, Taft was brought for the same reason. I think Henry Steele Commager was brought under the auspices; W.E.B. DuBois was brought under the Gabrielson lecture series, and Lerner, Max Lerner. But I was not connected with any of the political campaigns, had not been active in high school really and in those days, more so I think than now, Colby of course was outside the city. And then we were part of the student body that came to Colby when it was primarily on the downtown campus and then moved out to Mayflower Hill. I was in a state that was not my native state, I'd grown up in Boston, so there wasn't, students tended to, except those who lived in the state, tended not to get active politically as you see more going on now, tended to observe debate but not to be activists.

**CB:** Were there any groups on campus that were trying to gin up support for any of the presidential candidates or get involved?

**DN:** I don't remember any.

**CB:** Now, what were your leanings at that time?

**DN:** I ended up voting for Norman Thomas.

**CB:** Oh you did?

**DN:** I was disaffected with the, both the Republicans and the Democrats.

**CB:** On what grounds?

**DN:** Largely concern about the, concern about the Cold War and the fact that the U.S. government under Truman at that time seemed to be focusing on a hard line toward the Soviet Union and therefore fairly conservative international policies, and the heavy emphasis on defense spending. And I was not, obviously not very perceptive in terms of the fights going on in the Democratic Party between the Dixiecrats and Truman and it was really a protest vote.

**CB:** Why not Henry Wallace?

**DN:** I never could take Henry Wallace seriously.

**CB:** Is that because he sort of, because of his personality, because he ...?

**DN:** Well, it was part personality and part the fact that he seemed to be being pulled hither and yon by the Communists and a number of other groups that didn't, that, as I look back on it, it was a bunch of one-notes around him.

**CB:** One-notes?

**DN:** One-note organizations.

**CB:** You mean they had one particular, one issue?

**DN:** One issue, and I did not get the sense of a vision of what the society ought to be and so I finally decided to vote for Wallace, uh-uh, for Norman Thomas.

**CB:** Now, at that time, how do you think the student body broke out in terms of their preferences in the '48 election?

**DN:** In the '48 election my guess is that the majority of the campus was Republican, although it was not as wealthy a student body as it is today. We still had a number of lower middle income, lower income Maine natives plus, and a number of them were there under the G.I. Bill, and scholarship students like myself, and tuition was not terribly high in those days.

**CB:** What was it about, do you remember?

**DN:** Oh, I think when we started it was in the vicinity of three hundred and fifty dollars a semester and it had gone up outrageously from our point of view to, oh, probably nine hundred, a thousand dollars a year when we left. But you could get by with relatively little cash through scholarships and working.

**CB:** Did you work when you were a student?

**DN:** Yeah, I worked in several ways. I had a student pastorate starting in the middle of my freshman year and right through my senior year in a community called Riverside, which is part



of Vassalboro, on the other side of the river from Augusta, and that provided a modest amount of income. I think I was earning fifteen dollars a week.

**CB:** And that involved what?

**DN:** That involved going down on Sunday and preaching and occasionally going down for another meeting, but it was essentially a Sunday morning preaching responsibility. And then I worked in, let's see, I worked, oh, my freshman year I worked in the laboratory at, in the biology department doing dissections. They had so many students coming in that they had to compress the laboratory sections and they needed somebody to prepare specimens for examination. They couldn't have the students dissecting the frogs and the worms and other specimens, and I remember being in the biology laboratory, it seems like night after night after night, pinning out frogs on the trays with wax, beeswax, on the base. The formaldehyde just making your eyes run while you carefully prepared them for the students the next day, and doing the same thing with worms at other times. And I was a student proctor which gave me my room. And I worked in the cafeteria one year carrying trays up to the infirmary, which was in the Roberts Union, serving the students who were in the infirmary. So, and I worked every summer, so, and . . . .

**CB:** Where did you work during the summer?

**DN:** During the summer I worked in a boys' camp in Ocean Park for ...

**CB:** Ocean Park, Maine?

**DN:** Ocean Park, Maine.

**CB:** Oh, that's right, that was a church camp.

**DN:** That was a church camp. I went there as a camper and then worked as a junior counselor and then worked as a buildings and grounds person one summer taking care of the service building, which was the toilets and showers, and would go there before the camp opened and help with opening up and then closing up at the end of the season. And then in the summer of '48 went out to Michigan where my roommate and I worked for the college chaplain, actually, who had married into a family of, William Lyon Phelps . . . .

**CB:** William Lyon Phelps?

**DN:** ... who was the famous Yale English professor, popularizer of English literature and American literature. He had, Phelps had married into a family from Grosse Point, Michigan, very well to do, and they owned land up on the tip of the thumb and his summer place . . . .

**CB:** Tip of the thumb? What is that?

**DN:** The thumb in Michigan. Michigan looks like a hand. And you've got a thumb on the east side.

**CB:** Oh, is that up near Traverse City, in that area?

**DN:** Yes.<sup>1</sup>

**CB:** Oh yeah, I've been up there.

**DN:** Well, we were right on Lake Huron and Roger Prince and I, Roger was from Turner, Maine and had been in the service during the war and when he came back, he had not thought before the war that he'd ever go to college, and he . . . .

*(Phone interruption.)*

**DN:** Roger did not think he'd go to college until he came back and he had the G.I. Bill, and he was the first person in his family to go to college. I was the second in my family, I had a cousin who had gone to Northeastern. At any rate, we ended up going out there to work the summer building a boys' camp that this family had decided to put up for poor kids in Detroit. And that was, worked there, and then the next summer I'd graduated and Hilda and I worked in a restaurant in western Massachusetts, in South Egremont, but all through college . . . .

**CB:** South what? Egamont?

**DN:** Egremont, E-G-R-E-M-O-N-T, it's just south of Tanglewood and, in the Berkshires. But throughout college I worked summers, worked while at school, and then Christmas vacation I worked in a jewelry store in Boston. So it was a matter of piecing things together but it, it was possible in those days to do that.

**CB:** Did you get any scholarship money?

**DN:** I got some modest scholarships, yeah.

**CB:** Now, when you graduated, did you have any debts?

**DN:** No.

**CB:** No debts.

**DN:** No debts.

**CB:** And when did you and Hilda get married?

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<sup>1</sup> Both Beam and Nicoll were incorrect. Traverse City is on the west coast of Michigan, and not close to the "thumb." The William Lyon Phelps home was north of Bad Axe, MI

**DN:** We were married a week after we graduated. We had started dating really in February of our freshman year, and then went on to, and then married immediately after graduation.

**CB:** And she was in your class?

**DN:** Yeah, we were classmates. We'd actually met at Ocean Park. She was working in a restaurant in the village, and had met at some young peoples' meetings but didn't date until, it was February of our freshman year.

**CB:** And what was her major?

**DN:** She was a psych-soc major. Psychology and sociology and had, I think the major influence on her was a course in semantics, which she's used to good advantage over the years.

**CB:** When you were at Colby, Fullam was your advisor. Did he have any influence on your political views?

**DN:** Oh yes, I think he was a, I don't think that he moved me particularly in the political spectrum. I had grown up in a family that was nominally Republican. My mother was a native of Nova Scotia and her father was an ardent Liberal, and apparently felt very strongly and spoke loudly, and she was so turned off by that that she hated politics thenceforth and was very suspicious of anybody on the left. My father's family was quite conservative apparently, and he was a nominal Republican and they were Protestants in Boston and reacted as one might expect, I guess, against the Irish Catholic dominant Democrats.

So I grew up in a family that, lower middle class, working class, but tied to the Republicans. And other than being interested in Willkie, I don't think I had any strong attachments for the Republican Party growing up. And by the time I'd finished high school, certainly during high school, I had come to be an admirer of Roosevelt and was essentially a Democrat. I think probably Paul Fullam's strongest influence on me was in terms of an interest in the Jeffersonian traditions and the political process generally, and in being an iconoclast, which Paul was.

**CB:** What were his political leanings?

**DN:** Oh, he was a Democrat.

**CB:** I know he was a Democrat, but would you rate him a conservative Democrat, liberal Democrat?

**DN:** Very liberal Democrat.

**CB:** He was a what?

**DN:** Liberal Democrat.

**CB:** It's interesting because when I was reading through some clippings in Muskie's scrapbook, I think for the '54 election when he was elected governor and Fullam challenged Margaret Chase Smith, Fullam would criticize Smith for not being vigorous enough in the prosecution of the Cold War against Communism. He would be especially critical of the Eisenhower administration and then of course Smith was supportive of the Eisenhower administration, so his criticism was directed at her also. So I got the impression that he was basically a Cold Warrior.

**DN:** He was a traditional Democrat, and it's sometimes hard to remember in these days that liberal Democrats in the 1940s were essentially committed to big government domestically. Strong support for regulation coming out of the experience of the Depression and the periods before, tended to be very liberal on issues of civil rights and civil liberties. And because of experience with the Communists, somewhat pre-WWII but during the war feeling that Stalin and the American Communists had essentially played games with the American people and played games with the Russian people and Europeans, and therefore were firmly committed to opposing the Russian Communists essentially.

And the distinguishing factor between people like Paul and the conservative Republicans in that period was on domestic social issues and issues of foreign aid frequently. Or they were much more supportive of aid to Europe and to the underdeveloped countries, although that wasn't as hot an issue then as it has been recently. And I guess, I hadn't thought about it particularly in these terms, but certainly in the 1948 election Paul would have been and was a strong supporter of Harry Truman. And my view was that the Cold War and our involvement in Korea really went too far and was distorting the country's domestic policy. Now, increasingly as you got into the '50s and '60s those Democrats and the, in some ways the chief exemplar during the '60s was Scoop Jackson. Senator Jackson of Washington who became so obsessed with the military conflict with the Soviets and the Chinese that it, and so committed to the idea of solving problems by regulation, which was one of the characteristics of the '30s and '40s, that from my point of view time had passed them by.

And my guess is, Paul was an iconoclast, he was always tilting against the conventional wisdom of the time and he, if he was running against Margaret Chase Smith he probably beat up on her for not being strong enough on the Cold War issue. And, he had some problems, as you may recall from some of the material on that '54 campaign, because he had been an enrolled Republican in Maine because he so detested Brewster and the conservative wing of the Republican Party. And he felt that the Democratic Party was so ineffectual that if he was going to have a choice it would be in the Republican primaries.

**CB:** So he joined the Republican Party in order to oppose Brewster?

**DN:** Yeah.

**CB:** Tell me something about Brewster because I don't know too much about him. He was a strong supporter of Joe McCarthy?

**DN:** Yup. Brewster was a . . . .

**CB:** Excuse me, at this time, we're talking what, 1948?

**DN:** Nineteen forty eight, yeah.

**CB:** What was, Brewster was the U.S. senator?

**DN:** He was still the U.S. senator. He lost, let's see, did he lose?

**CB:** Well, Margaret Chase Smith went to the Senate in 1948.

**DN:** Forty eight. Okay. She, Brewster would have been the second senator at that time, that's right, because, yeah, she was elected in '48 and Brewster came up in '52 and Fred Payne beat him in the primary in '52. And Brewster had been governor. He was conservative, an ally of people like McCarthy, McKellar, Styles Bridges of New Hampshire, was a member of the Ku Klux Klan back in the '20s and '30s.

**CB:** Oh, he had been a member of the Klan?

**DN:** Oh yeah.

**CB:** I had heard that he'd gotten support from the Klan, but I didn't know he was a member.

**DN:** I'm pretty sure that's going to establish that he was a member at one time.

**CB:** Was that a liability in 1948?

**DN:** By '48 it was, yeah, and it was dual liability in '48 because it conjured up all the images of the Klan in the south and brutal treatment of the Blacks. It also, because in Maine it was not so much an anti-Black as an anti-Catholic movement, gave him real trouble in a lot of Maine communities because much of the anti-Catholic, anti-foreign prejudice was washing away in Maine, except in the very rural fundamentalist areas. So, and Brewster was increasingly isolated by that period and he backed Taft in the '48 campaign and, I don't know that he was involved in the '52 presidential campaign.

One of my favorite recollections about Brewster and attitudes toward him was a story told about Sumner Pike. Sumner was from Lubec and was appointed to the Securities and Exchange Commission, he was one of the original three commissioners appointed by President Roosevelt, and served there and then later served on the Atomic Energy Commission and was for a short time acting chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission in the early part of the Eisenhower administration. But he was too liberal for a number of the members of the, Republican members of the Senate . . . .

**CB:** But he was a Republican?

**DN:** He was Republican, oh, Sumner was a Republican, and had, was a Bowdoin graduate along with Brewster and a number of other prominent Republicans at the time. But Sumner had a very long distinguished career, couldn't get confirmed as chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission so he left Washington and came back to Maine, served on the Public Utilities Commission and chaired it under Ed Muskie, and then ran for the legislature and served several terms in the Maine state legislature as a house member from Lubec to round out his official public career.

Well, Sumner was probably one of the most brilliant men in Maine. He was also a fairly heavy drinker and it was always a source of astonishment that he maintained his mental acuity as late in his life as he did considering the amount of alcohol he consumed. He was also a, he was known not to be an admirer of Brewster, but he would never say anything publicly, he was very careful about what he said about people. One day the, at a convention of some sort, reporters cornered him and got him talking and plied him with drinks and finally one of them popped the question that they were waiting for and said, "Sumner, tell us, what do you really think of Ralph Brewster?" "Well," said Sumner, and he used to wipe his face like this, he said, "well, for someone with so much intelligence and so much native ability, I've never known anybody who could be so goddamn crooked." Which about summed up . . . .

**CB:** Was Brewster crooked in the sense of taking bribes or kickbacks or anything?

**DN:** No, he probably never took any money but he could not be trusted and he, he would play any game that would gain him political advantage and he didn't care how he hurt other people politically. But, and he was so conservative and so narrow minded that people like Sumner and Margaret Chase Smith detested him. I remember observing him and he was kind of an oily character. In that sort of backwoods Maine style, but oily.

**CB:** Where was he from originally, what was his home base?

**DN:** Dexter.

**CB:** He was from Dexter. When you were at Colby did you intend to stay in Maine, or did you have any, I mean, once you gave up the idea of becoming a minister, did you have any set career plans after you graduated?

**DN:** I was interested in teaching and graduate school and the opportunity for the fellowship to Penn State came along and I took that. Unfortunately for us, it was a one year non-renewable fellowship and by the summer of 1950 when I was winding up my work on courses, Hilda was pregnant. And she had been working in the library at Penn State and that was providing income for us so obviously we couldn't continue with school. And I was not, I suspect the opportunities weren't that great and I didn't have the sense of what one might be able to do to continue searching for grants and other ways of supporting us. So we left the State College area, came

back to New Jersey where her folks lived . . . .

**CB:** Where in New Jersey?

**DN:** Tenafly, New Jersey, just across the river from New York, and stayed for a short time with them, then found housing in Hackensack, New Jersey where our first son was born. And I got a job as a route salesman for a laundry company and on weekends, Saturdays, I would go into New York to the public library and then on occasion, when there was a long weekend, I'd go to Boston. I did, into, I'd gone to Philadelphia while we were still at Penn State to do some of the research on the thesis. And we were there in the New York-New Jersey area from the fall of 1950 until the fall of 1951, about a year. And at that time I was, I'd finished the research and was working on writing for the thesis and had applied for some teaching jobs primarily in private secondary schools and not been successful.

I obviously hadn't been very smart about my major in one respect because by 1950 if you were an historian and your specialty was American history, you were a glut on the market because nobody had been able to study in Europe or Asia for the preceding fifteen years and that, or preceding ten or eleven years at least, and anyone who majored in history tended to major in American history. So there I was with American history as my specialty, most of it focused on the pre-Civil War period and I didn't have my graduate degree yet, so the jobs weren't coming in teaching.

And about that time Hilda's folks bought a house in Buckfield which was to be their retirement home ultimately. They bought it because it was close to where my mother-in-law's sister lived and her mother, Hilda's grandmother, was in the care of the sis-, the two sisters. So they decided to buy a summer place where they could be close by and take care of the mother during the summer. And they said, we're buying this house, we've bought this house, if you would like to live there rent free through the winter, it's a big house in the village, why don't you do that? So we decided to leave New Jersey, went to Buckfield, arrived in, toward the end of September of 1951. And at that point I first got work picking apples in Buckfield and teaching as a substitute teacher in the Rumford schools, Stephens High School as a matter of fact. In one sense I followed Ed's footsteps, because he taught there at one time, and didn't know anything about Maine politics or Ed Muskie or anything else.

And one of the funny earlier experiences was in connection with apple picking. I went up to the orchard owned by a man names Smith, Virgil Smith, wonderful old man with a great white handlebar moustache who drove... one of the gentlest people I've ever known. I went up and went to the farm and said I was looking for work as an apple picker, did he have any openings. And he looked at me and he said, "Ever picked apples before?" I said, "No, sir." "Well, I do need pickers, I'll take a chance on you and I'll start you with the women." Which meant that I was allowed to pick apples standing on the ground, not to climb the ladder. But after a little while he decided I could be trusted to go up in the ladder and I graduated to being a full time, full scale picker.

**CB:** That was just in the fall of '51 that you did this?

**DN:** That was in the fall of '51.

**CB:** Now, what was the status of your master thesis at this time?

**DN:** I was still working, I was just about winding it up. We finished it and Hilda typed it in time in the fall of '51 so that I got my degree in the commencement of mid-winter '52, and did not go to the commencement but I got the degree at that, was awarded the degree at that time. And in September I, it was obvious that there weren't going to be any permanent teaching jobs so the next thing to do was to decide where to get employment that would support the family, and Lewiston was the closest place. And Hilda said, if you're going to go to work, why don't you try something that would be of interest to you rather than delivering laundry or something else. So I decided that I probably would be able to work in either a radio station or a newspaper as a reporter.

**CB:** Had you done any of that kind of work before?

**DN:** I'd done some writing for the Colby Echo, the college newspaper, when I was at Colby, and obviously had written for class work and sermons when I was in college, but I'd never been involved in a radio station. I went into Lewiston and walked up and down Lisbon Street debating with myself where I would go to look. I knew there was the Lewiston Sun-Journal and I'd looked in the phone book and I knew that there was WCOU and WLAM, and I really was not very sure what I should do. I remember walking up and down Lisbon Street and then finally deciding, well, I'll try first at WLAM and at WLAM I went up the stairs at 129 Lisbon Street and walked in and said . . . .

*End of Side One*

*Side Two*

**CB:** Okay, Don, you were, were there studios there, at 29 Lisbon Street?

**DN:** Studios were at 129 Lisbon Street, yup, on the second, no, I guess it was the third floor of that building, it went way up to the top. On the second floor Ross Nolin had a photography studio, portrait photography studio, and on the third floor WLAM, on the second floor, excuse me, on the second floor Ross Nolin had his studios, and 'LAM had its offices, its management and sales offices, and on the third floor they had the studios and the newsroom.

And so I went up and it so happened that they were looking for a part time copywriter and a part time announcer for Saturday afternoons and evenings. So Denny Shute, Elden Shute, S-H-U-T-E, was the station manager and he invited me to audition so I went up to the studio with him and read some copy and they decided to hire me and I went to work for, I think it was about fifteen hours a week first. I'd come in, fifteen or twenty hours a week, I would come in and do copywriting during the week, couple of days a week, and then on Saturdays I came in at noon and worked until eleven that night. It was a long day. And that was strictly disk jockey and I



read some news copy on the weekend, but that was simply pulling stuff off the AP teletype. Then . . . .

**CB:** Excuse me, Don, copywriter, what does that involve?

**DN:** Copywriting? That's writing advertising copy. And you would, the salesmen would have a client, oh, I can remember writing copy for, let's see, LePage's Bakery, Biron's Beauty Salon, Dostie Jewelry, Davis Cadillac, Advance Auto, etc.

**CB:** All of these firms are still there.

**DN:** Yeah. And you'd write commercials, usually they were a minute, some of them were a half minute . . . .

**CB:** So they would just give the data to, or what they want to the salesmen and you would put it into broadcastable form?

**DN:** That's right. And then the salesmen would go over it and run it by the purchaser of the advertising and if it was okay then it went to the announcers. It was great training, great training, because in writing commercial copy for radio, you have to write so that people will get it the first time and that means writing with an ear for the words and how people will hear it. And then as I moved into, they invited me to become a reporter and I joined the news staff, gradually moving, doing part time reporting and part, still disk jockey . . .

**CB:** Now, when you were doing copywriting and then doing the Saturday work as an announcer, I mean, that surely didn't pay you enough to support a family, did it?

**DN:** Yeah, it was enough because we didn't have to pay rent, and we, I did do some teaching in the early days. And it, by Christmas time I was working pretty well full time.

**CB:** Christmas of?

**DN:** Fifty one. Yeah, so it was a matter of three, four months that I was on part time work.

**CB:** And teaching, what kind of teaching? Substitute teaching?

**DN:** Substitute teaching. I taught a couple of history classes on occasion. I remember teaching the classroom part of driver education.

**CB:** Where was this, in Lewiston?

**DN:** No, no, this was at Stephens, at Rumford. And I raked leaves in the late fall, and I continued to pick apples after I started work, I'd work on weekdays when I wasn't going into Lewiston. Yeah, you pieced things together, and . . .

**CB:** Was Hilda working at all?

**DN:** No, no, she was taking care of Hugh, and we . . .

**CB:** But you managed to get by on what you could scrape together.

**DN:** We managed to get by.

**CB:** The Korean War was going at this time. I mean, were you vulnerable to the draft? Certainly not after you had a child but at any time since college?

**DN:** No, I had, let's see, I turned eighteen on August 4th, 1945, and went for induction, actually, induction physical and was turned down, as I expected to be. I, when I was, from the time I was in third grade I believe it was, which would have made me nine years old, I had had a mastoid problem and in 1939 I had had a ruptured appendix and peritonitis. And in those days you did not have the antibiotics that we had within a couple of years of that. And the only treatment for peritonitis was to open up the belly and drain it and hope that the natural immunity would, in your body, could fight the infection. As a result I had some damage to my ear and I had extensive scarring on my abdomen. And when they, I remember in the, when was it, it was in the early summer of 1945 I filed an application with the draft board for a pre-induction physical because I felt that I would not be accepted and there was no point in going through the whole induction process. And I was thinking about college, and the draft board sent me to a physician who examined me and said he couldn't say that I would be rejected. So at the end of August, in early August after I turned eighteen I showed up for pre-induction physical and went through and when I came out I can remember to this day the sergeant who was saying, looking up at me and taking this big stamp that said rejected. I was classified 4F so I was not vulnerable to the draft after that. Otherwise I would have gone in just at the end of the war.

**CB:** Now, at WLAM you were mostly a disk jockey on Saturdays?

**DN:** That was the start, yeah.

**CB:** That must have been a real surprise, to have to select records and figure out what to play and then comment between the records and so forth.

**DN:** It was a little easier than that for me for most of the programming, because on Saturdays you had the news program at 12:30 and after that was over, you went to the Metropolitan Opera most of the season. And then in the late afternoon there was a short period of playing records and we tended to use some ASCAP supplied material during that program. Then there was the evening news and then there were some network programs, and . . .

**CB:** Oh, that's right, so in other words you didn't have to select a whole two hours of records and then chatter between them.

**DN:** A limited amount of that. And then there was a program called *Danson la Guigues*, jigs and reels. That was a program produced by one of the salesmen, Emilien Ouellette.

**CB:** Emilien, E-M-I-L-I-E-N. And what was the name of the program?

**DN:** *Dansons la Guigues*.

**CB:** Can you spell that?

**DN:** D-A-N-S-O-N-S, *la*, or, it must have been *les*, L-E-S, *guigues*, G-U-I-G-U-E-S.

**CB:** G-U-E-S.

**DN:** Yeah. But it was jigs and reels, and it was real Canadian, both Acadian and Québécois jigs and reels, traditional small fiddle and percussion, mostly in French, and Emilien would record commercials. The introduction was recorded on a great big disk, it was a wax disk that had been cut. This was so primitive in today's terms that when I first went to work there, all of the recording was done for studio work on these large wax disks. And we had a wire recorder that we used for some work on news programs and then later while I was there we got the first tape recorders, which were reel to reel and big box. It was about, oh, I'd say eight inches deep and about fifteen inches square and weighed probably ten or fifteen pounds. When you edited in those days, you had to literally cut and splice the tape, you didn't have the sophisticated electronic editing techniques you have today. But, and obviously we didn't have cassettes. But when I first went, the only recordings used were either the regular, we had the LP'S, we had some very large disks that were LP'S, they were about eighteen inches in, no, not eighteen inches, probably twenty four inches in diameter, much bigger than the standard disks. And then these wax disks that you played on the turntables. And Emilien Levesque, not Emilien Levesque, but Emilio, I'm wrong about Emilio.

**CB:** It's Emilio?

**DN:** Yeah, it was Emilio, E-M-I-L-I-O, Ouellette. Emilio would, had recorded the opening and close for the program, in French and English, and then some of the advertisers wanted their copy in French and Emilio would do that. The program, which lasted I think two hours, it was two hours of programming, was the records that Emilio selected, the commercials that he recorded, and then commercials that I would read and I would introduce some of the records. No, I never did introduce the records. Those were just part of the routine.

And the two things that stand out in my mind from that program showing how little I knew, and a very different culture from the one I was used to. Sometimes I would play the same record twice in a row because I couldn't tell one jig from another reel. And the phone would ring and some irate person speaking in French would start criticizing me for playing the same jig or the same reel twice in a row, and I would have to apologize and say that I didn't speak French. And

then the other thing was problems in the pronunciation of the local French. I mentioned earlier Biron's Beauty Salon, and I can remember reading a commercial one night for Biron's, only I didn't know how it was pronounced, I just got the copy . . . .

**CB:** Would you read commercials in French?

**DN:** No, in English. Some of them were English, some of them were French. The French, ones in French were read by Emilio. I came to one that was in English and picked up the copy, turned up the microphone and said, "Ladies, for the latest in hair style, go to Biron's Beauty Salon," speaking I thought in the best French pronunciation of the proprietor, finished the commercial, hung up, went to the next reel. The phone rang, picked up the phone, and it was Romeo Sansoucy, the other salesman and the salesman for Biron's, "God dammit, that's not "*Biron's*", that's "*Byron's*." So much for applying my high school French to Lewiston pronunciation. But I continued that into the winter and then I, the next shift really came for me in the transition into the news program. I was working early in the morning. I came in and opened the station and did the . . . .

**CB:** About what time in the morning?

**DN:** Oh, I had to get there about 5:00 in the morning for 6:00 on the air, and I had two tasks. One was producing the news for the early morning programs, and hooking up John Gould who broadcast from Lisbon Ridge, and John... And then I would write copy and then gradually worked into the newsroom. And that happened in the winter of '51, '52 and by '52 I was busy in the newsroom.

**CB:** Doing what in the newsroom?

**DN:** I was reporter covering City Hall and then gradually in '52, '53 became, in effect, the State House reporter for WLAM, which meant essentially going up for a big story on occasion or, and going regularly to the governor's news conference, which had become an institution by then. And worked more and more closely with Parker Hoy who was the son of the owner and news director. And Parker and I, as you'll learn later, crossed paths in more ways than one over the years in politics.

**CB:** Now, when you covered City Hall, what exactly did that entail? Finding out what was going on in terms of city council action?

**DN:** City council action or city government generally. I would, as a routine, I would go over to City Hall in the morning and go by the City Clerk's office to find out what was going on with the city council, stop in at the police department, check the blotter there, check the court. And if anything seemed to be happening with the school department, the superintendent's office at that time was in the City Hall, and the comptroller's office was the other important office. We had a man named Ralph Skinner who covered Auburn City Hall and the county government. And it was not as aggressive a news operation as is the case now, but we were generally covering issues

that we thought were important to people.

**CB:** By then did you, had you decided that journalism was your career, or was this just simply another job?

**DN:** Well, it was another job, but it interested me and I was enjoying it and I did not, I guess I looked on it as a career at that point, as a potential career, unless I somehow got enough money to go back to school and go for my Ph.D.

**CB:** Was that ever a serious possibility?

**DN:** Not really because by the time I might have been thinking of moving on to that, we had our second child in '53 and by then I was, I'd met Frank Coffin and that whole series of events was starting to play out.

**CB:** Which we should discuss the next time. Okay.

*End of Interview*