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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

February 27, 1992

Place

Portland, Maine

ID Number

MOH 021

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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: OPS; Democratic National Committee; 1952-1954 Maine Democratic Party; 1954 Maine gubernatorial campaign; Republican Party in Maine; 1952 Republican party splits; Don's influence on Frank Coffin; Democratic cities in Maine; Jimmy Sawyer; Coffin's public meetings and survey; Lewiston charter change; 1954 state convention in Lewiston; television's role in the 1954 campaign; influence of radio; novelty campaign materials; Louis Labbe; the hurricane; Dave Stevens; and the Democratic Party today.

Indexed Names

Arnold, Lorin
Bean, Linda
Benoit, Henry Arthur
Bishop, Neil
Boucher, Jean Charles
Brewster, Ralph Owen, 1888-1961

Coffin, Frank Morey
Coffin, Ruth Ulrich
Cohen, William S.
Colbath, Ken
Corliss, Edgar
Cormier, Lucia
Cote, Al
Crocker, Robert
Cross, Burton
Curtis, Kenneth M., 1931-
Damborg, Peter
Delahanty, Tom
Dubord, Dick
Dubord, Harold
Friend, Ike and Norris
Fullam, Paul
Furbush, Perry
Green, Ron
Guite, Roland
Hale, Bob
Harkin, Tom
Hoy, Frank
Hoy, Parker
Hutchinson, Marjorie
Jalbert, Louis
Labbe, Louis
Lemieux, Lionel "Lal"
Lewis, Bill
Martin, John
McIntire, Clifford
McKernan, John
McMahon, Dick
Muskie, Edmund S., 1914-1996
Muskie, Jane Gray
Nelson, Charlie
Nicoll, Don
Nute, Floyd
Oliver, Jim
Payne, Fred
Payne, Tony
Penley, Ed
Pray, Charlie
Sawyer, Jimmy
Shute, Elden "Denny"

Skinner, Ralph
Smith, Margaret Chase, 1897-1995
Snowe, Olympia J. (Olympia Jean), 1947-
Stevens, Dave
Tupper, Asa
Tupper, Stanley

Transcript

Chris Beam: Okay, this is the third interview I'm doing with Don Nicoll, this is on the 27th of February starting at 1:15 PM in Don's office in Portland, Maine. Okay, Don, we were at, we stopped at the point where you were working for WLAM. What year was that?

Don Nicoll: It started in the fall of 1951, I started as a part time copywriter and disk jockey and by late '51 had moved into the news department and in 1952 was full time on news and radio reporting and by 1953 Frank Hoy, the owner, had acquired a license for two UHF television stations, one in Portland and one in Lewiston, and we, I was news editor of radio and television for WLAM from about the middle of 1953 until I left in June of '54.

CB: Okay, were you actually a reporter, or were you just the news editor? I mean, did you go out on a beat and collect news stories and film and that sort of thing?

DN: I used to cover Lewiston City Hall and the county building once in awhile.

CB: As a TV reporter?

DN: As a radio and then TV reporter, and the State House.

CB: And when did you first run into Ed Muskie?

DN: In October of '53.

CB: And what was he doing then?

DN: In that fall, he was a lawyer practicing in Waterville and he was also at the time the Democratic National Committeeman, had been since '52.

CB: And in what capacity did you meet him?

DN: Louis Jalbert, Mr. Democrat, so-called, had organized a news conference in reverse in Augusta, at the old Augusta House, in which he gathered together some of the Democratic leaders. And, as I recall, Louis was there, I don't know whether Dick Dubord was there or not, but Ed and Jane Muskie came with him, and Frank Coffin and Ruth Coffin, and Lucia Cormier, I

believe, National Committeewoman, maybe a couple of others came, and the State House press corps as it were came to answer questions from the Democrats. It was really rather an ingenious proposal.

CB: What was the purpose of this news conference?

DN: The purpose was really to give some exposure to the Democratic leadership and also I think from Louis' point of view to give these folks who didn't know much about politics from his point of view some insights into what the reporters thought about what was going on. Doc Arnold was there, Doc was the political reporter for the Bangor Daily News, Peter Damborg, who was the political reporter for the Gannett newspapers, Floyd Nute, the UPI reporter at the State House, Bob Crocker the bureau chief for AP at the State House, Ed Penley who was then the editorial writer for the Lewiston Sun, and Lionel Lemieux, Lionel A. Lemieux who was the political columnist and editorial writer for Lewiston Evening Journal. And at that time, there were no television stations at that time. I'm wondering now, yeah, that's right, that was about the right time.

CB: So the idea of this news conference was to gather all you reporters together and the Democratic political leadership would ask you guys questions?

DN: That's right, that's what it was.

CB: What kind of questions would they ask you?

DN: I remember they were asking us what our sense of the political scene in the state was, what was going on in Augusta in terms of the Democrats and the Republican governor, how, what was the strength of the two parties respectively, um, some questions on issues but I don't recall the details.

CB: Were there any state legislative leaders besides Jalbert? Jalbert was in the state senate at that time?

DN: He was in the house.

CB: He was in the house.

DN: Yeah, he always served in the house, he never served in the senate. And I can't remember whether there were any of the senators there. It would have been Jean Charles Boucher, or Armand, no, Armand Defresne was a judge. If there was anybody from the Senate, it would have been Jean Charles from Androscoggin County. I don't think that, he was the leader at one point, I don't, and there probably was a Democratic senator from York county, but I don't recall. I just, I can remember the room and I can remember seeing the folks and in general the atmosphere, but not the specific questions.

CB: Do you think it was, was there any other motive behind this meeting, or was it just to sound you folks out as to what was going on in the state? I mean, do you think they were aiming at the upcoming campaign in '54 to see if they could get some good press coverage?

DN: To some degree, to some degree, yeah. I think Louis had a sense that things were changing and it was a chance from his point of view to educate people like Frank and Ed whom he always regarded as rank amateurs in this business. And it also was self promotion for Louis, both with them and with the press because he could get all these folks there. And obviously we asked them some questions, too.

CB: So that's when you met, first met Muskie?

DN: That's when I first met him. I'd met Frank earlier that spring. He had spoken at the Jefferson-Jackson dinner in Westbrook and it was a call to the party to revive itself, etc., and matter of fact Denny Shute, the station manager at WLAM had noticed a piece about Frank's speech and suggested that it might be a good idea to interview him. They followed up on that and I talked to him. That's when I started badgering him to do something.

CB: Do what?

DN: To do something, to run.

CB: Oh really, yeah.

DN: From my perspective as a reporter covering the State House and looking at the way the governor and his colleagues functioned, at that time, you had Burt Cross who had come through a bruising primary fight in 1952, which revealed a big split in the party, not along ideological grounds. It wasn't Linda Bean versus Tony Payne sort of thing. It was power blocks within the party and Burt Cross had won the primary and of course won the governorship, but there were lots of bitter folks around and they were sniping and maneuvering and figuring out when they could take over. The Senate, you had gone through in '52 another bruising primary between Fred Payne, who had been gov---, who was governor in '52, and Ralph Owen Brewster, the old senator, and Payne had won. That was an ideological fight as much as a power base fight. And Payne had been under a cloud for some time because of alleged association with people who were influence peddlers and notably the big liquor scandal, which was the first time I ever saw Frank. That's another story.

But as I went to the State House, went up for the governor's news conference and for other events, you had the real sense that the Republicans really were afflicted with dry rot. They were, they had no strong grass roots support. It was pretty much focused on who was in power and who controlled the legislature in the State House. On top of that you had three congressmen who were lackluster, to put it mildly. In the first district you had Bob Hale who was a patrician, the old school, absolutely no sense of relating to rank and file voters. You had Charlie Nelson in the second district, and Charlie was known to the reporters as an alcoholic who was in trouble all the

time but in those days people didn't tend to report on that. And in the third district you had probably the strongest member of the delegation but very stodgy, Cliff McIntire, who had come out of the potato industry and was, pretty much as an agent of Maine potato growers and not much else.

And Frank lived in the second district, Lewiston. And I felt that Charlie Nelson was ripe for the picking and here was a bright young lawyer with credentials coming out of the largest city in the second district and he had a good chance. So I talked, after we concluded the interview I asked him, I said, "That's a nice speech you made, full of rhetoric, when are you gonna do something about it?"

CB: This interview took place when, Don?

DN: This was in the spring of '53.

CB: The spring of '53.

DN: I imagine that the speech was given in February, March, which is when they used to have the local Jefferson-Jackson dinners. And Westbrook in those days was a much more, much more of an industrial community than it is today. Now it's still largely working class, but it doesn't have the focus that it had around the mill. The mill really dominated Westbrook much more than it does even today. And that was one of the more important Democratic cities in the state. The Democratic cities were Biddeford, Westbrook, Portland to a lesser degree, Lewiston of course, Rumford

CB: What about Auburn?

DN: Auburn, no, Auburn was a Republican city. You had a cluster of Democrats in New Canada, New Auburn, but other than that it was predominantly Republican. And then you went from there to places like Rumford and Millinocket and Madawaska and the St. John valley.

CB: And Bangor?

DN: Bangor was not a Democratic city. They were always, the Democrats were always fighting, they couldn't get together to carry the day. So, Frank had what I thought was a very good base and a chance to really win in '54, but he wasn't ready to run and he kept resisting this. I kept calling him and saying, do something. And finally in the mid-winter, after that news conference in reverse, Jimmy Sawyer, who was the state chairman, decided on somebody's advice that he needed to appoint a strong pre-convention platform committee. In those days the platform was written by the pre-convention platform committee. And they would bring their platform, having negotiated it out with the party leaders, to the convention and then it would be presented and voted, and there might be some amendments and additions or deletions. But there was no public discussion, no public debate before the convention and it was pretty much written in a back room somewhere.

Jimmy was told that he needed to make his appointments to the pre-convention platform committee and he decided to name Frank, along with Roland Guite, who was the state committeeman from Hancock County. Roland was a real estate agent, or broker, in Ellsworth. And Jim Oliver who had been a Republican member of Congress and then was defeated by Bob Hale and later switched and became a Democrat and in 1952 ran for governor against Fred Payne.¹ So Frank was in charge of that committee and he almost didn't do it because he was so irritated with Jimmy who announced the appointment without having called Frank.

CB: Oh, really? Just announced that he was going to be on the platform committee?

DN: Yup. To me he was an interesting character. He lived in Castine. He was a chauffeur and handyman for a couple of elderly maiden ladies, wealthy summer people, and he would take care of their place in the winter time and did odd jobs, and when they were there in the summer he was their chauffeur and grounds keeper, I guess. And he had a real talent for stump speech in the old populist mode. Had a high squeaky voice and I can remember him in the '54 campaign standing up, (*mimics*) "Let's cross Cross off the ballot!" It sounded just about like that, that was his rallying cry. But I don't know how he ever got to be state chairman. Somebody put him in the job figuring he'd do all right and he didn't pay much attention to the niceties; he was told to appoint somebody and Frank Coffin's name was given to him so he appointed him.

Well, Frank took that on and decided that if they were going to have a platform committee it ought to bring the public into the process, so he did a couple of things. He held some public meetings and he got agreement to send out a survey with the help of a few folks including an "objective reporter". Put together a survey, developed a list based on the League of Women Voters, other organizations, voting, not voting lists but a list of contributors and community leaders that Ed Muskie and Lucia Cormier had put together, and the heads of all the state departments and heads of some civic organizations, and sent that survey out, and sent it to the newspapers as well; captured quite a bit of attention. First time a party in Maine was soliciting opinions from

CB: Now, this survey asked what? What kinds of questions did they ask?

DN: Oh, asking essentially what people felt were the top issues, how did they feel about the organization of state government, how did they feel about economic development policies, how did they feel about pollution problems, some health and welfare questions.

CB: They just sort of solicited what, um, essays, comments of that nature?

DN: Some yes/no, some, I don't recall any rankings, and some short, inviting short answers. And those responses were carefully tallied and then used in formulating the draft platform.

¹ Jim Oliver ran for governor against Burton Cross in 1952.

CB: Oh, so it wasn't just a publicity stunt?

DN: Oh, no, he used them seriously. And then put together a very long, fairly detailed proposed platform and held public hearing on it and it was debated in public in the committee on the night before the convention took it up, and then presented the convention then acted on. And then the candidates in '54 endorsed it and Ed took it as his platform for the campaign.

CB: How many people was the survey sent to?

DN: I think it was probably around five hundred or something.

CB: Oh really, that many. And you got back, and they got back how many?

DN: I forget the numbers.

CB: Now, at this time you were still acting as a reporter?

DN: Yup.

CB: Were you covering mostly the Democrats or did you try to cover both sides?

DN: Oh, I covered both sides, but most of the coverage, in those days particularly, a news operation such as WLAM had was unusual for a radio station. WCSH in Portland had a couple of reporters. And we had, well, we had a sports reporter, we had a fellow, Ralph Skinner, who covered Auburn City Hall and the county building most of the time, and I and Parker Hoy, who was Frank's son. And much of your time was spent covering local events, the city council, the school board, that sort of thing, the police beat. And my State House reporting and political reporting was mostly going to weekly or biweekly news conference or a major hearing, particularly on the Lewiston Charter change, which was the big issue in the legislature from Lewiston's point of view, and occasionally a political event.

There was not much in depth or aggressive reporting, going out and tracking people down. You didn't have the time and relied mostly on the AP for a lot of the stuff. In fact, most of, most of the information I got outside of the hard news occasionally came from talking with the other reporters, particularly the State House reporters. You could get quite a bit of information on what was going on, who was doing what, from them. But, no, I didn't, I very, I don't think anybody knew that I was helping Frank, first with that survey, helping him devise it and then . . .

CB: So you actually helped write the questions and so forth?

DN: Yeah, helped do some work on the questions with him and then helped put together the lists and then spent some time with him going through the responses later. And that didn't take an awful lot of time. It was a low key activity. In the spring of '54, Frank finally agreed that he would run for a position on the state committee representing Androscoggin County and he would

seek the state chairmanship, and he wouldn't run for the congressional seats but he'd do that, and at the convention, see after, at the convention he was elected to the state committee. He let the local folks know that he wanted to do it. Albert Cote was the member of the state committee from Lewiston.

CB: And where was that held?

DN: The convention was in Lewiston.

CB: The convention was in Lewiston. About how many people showed up to that, at that time?

DN: I suspect there weren't more than two or three hundred at the peak event. And at that, at the time of the convention there was one announced candidate, Jim Oliver who was running for Congress in the first district. They had nobody running for Senate, nobody running for governor, nobody running in the second or the third district. They had a platform. And Frank was elected to the state committee and then was elected within a few weeks as state chairman. It was a matter of maybe a couple of weeks, he was elected state chairman, at which point he came back to me and said, you've been on my back all this time, now I want you to go to work for the state committee. They had no staff at the time, and he went out and he raised a thousand dollars. Well he went to the state committee and said, I want to hire a full time executive, and, executive secretary, and they said, fine, Frank, go ahead and do it if you can raise the money to pay for it. So he went out and raised a thousand dollars and then said, I want you to go to work for me and. . . .

CB: So you were hired on as executive secretary of the state committee?

DN: On the basis of a thousand dollars in pledges at that time.

CB: So how long would this position last? I'm interested in the details of how you made ends meet and carried on this political activity.

DN: Well we, I went to work for the committee in June, early June, I think it was June 4th, or . . .

CB: Did you quit your WLAM job, or were you on a leave of absence?

DN: I quit.

CB: You quit.

DN: And that spring, before, between the convention and the actual move, I spent a lot of time on the phone in the newsroom talking to Frank, and Ed occasionally, about the search for candidates. And it was a wild and woolly time because they had by, I forget what date in April in those days, but by early April they had to have people selected and they had to have the nominating petitions out and signed and back in for them to qualify to be on the ballot in June, in

the primary. And my college advisor at Colby, head of the history department

CB: Paul Fullam?

DN: Paul Fullam, yeah, they, he was thinking of governor and then said, no, no, they, in fact they tried to get Paul to run for governor and Paul said no, he was interested in the Senate seat and foreign policy essentially and national issues, so he agreed to run for the U.S. Senate against Margaret Chase Smith. They dragooned Tom Delahanty, who later served in the court and whose son is now on the court, to run in the second district. He was a lawyer in Lewiston. And in the third district, they finally recruited a fellow named Ken Colbath, who was a small business owner, he owned a small record store in Presque Isle; got Ken to agree to run to fill out the ticket. And on the governorship, they ran through an absolutely wild list of people from the believable to the laughable in terms of being credible candidates.

CB: Well the story I've heard is that Ed Muskie was sort of trying to recruit a candidate

DN: He was involved in that.

CB: ... and the feedback was, why don't you run, Ed, for governor. Is that true?

DN: Yup, ah, he had broken his back the previous year and was still really recuperating and did not feel that he could run and Ed being the cautious fellow he was I think really didn't want to run unless he felt he had a good chance of winning. And his real interest, his real love at that time was the U.S. Senate, not the governorship because he had, from his college days, had been fascinated by foreign policy and national issues. But that, running against Margaret Chase Smith didn't appeal to him either, and so he tried to avoid the prospect of running that year, everybody had agreed that this was going to be a building year. And so they went through this list, Perry Furbush, Palmyra, Edgar Corliss from Gorham

CB: Palmyra?

DN: Palmyra, which is up outside

CB: Oh, Furbush was from Palmyra, okay.

DN: Furbush was from Palmyra. Edgar Corliss, I almost think they may have even turned to Dick Dubord's father who was getting on in years, Harold Dubord, and a few others. Frank probably has the names like that, and Ed, too. But, uh, they kept coming back to Ed and saying why don't you run and finally he agreed to do it as a service to the party. And, that happened in April, and in the next couple of months Frank was negotiating with the committee and then asked me if I'd go to work for him and I agreed and left the paper¹ and went to work for the party starting early June. And then began the effort first to get out the vote for the primary, make sure, trying to fill the ticket as much as possible with legislative candidates, that's where

¹ Nicoll meant "the TV station."

the big holes were.

CB: Now, the primary took place when? In June?

DN: June, it was around, I think, June 20th runs in my mind, but it was the third Monday in June, it was a different date than it is now, it moved to Tuesday. And we had three tasks really initially. One was to raise money, the second was to get as many legislative and county candidates as we could to fill out the ticket, and the third was to start building the organization.

And Frank did most of the work on the fund raising. And Ed did some and Lucia did some and they got some of the Democratic lawyers involved in doing that work. And I spent most of my time on the nuts and bolts of organizing a coordinated campaign for '54 and providing support particularly for Tom Delahanty and Ken Colbath. Paul Fullam had a couple of former students who took time off and worked as volunteers with him. Ed had Dick McMahan who was the treasurer in Waterville who worked for him. Dick stayed on as treasurer, was, that paid his bills and he could work as a volunteer as a political job so there were no issues of violating the Hatch Act or anything like that. Jim Oliver had, well, Jim was pretty much a one man band that year. It wasn't until the next election that Ken Curtis got involved in his campaign. And so we spent our time coordinating the campaigns for Jim, Paul Fullam and Tom Delahanty, Ken Colbath and Ed Muskie.

CB: Now, when you say coordinating the campaigns, this would be joint appearances, would you handle press releases, or would they, their individual staffs doing it?

DN: Individual staffs did their press releases on the whole, although from time to time we'd help with writing some material for them. And a lot of it was developing a joint schedule so that they were covering many of the same events together and traveling as much as possible together. We also, this was the first year that there was television in the campaign. And we arranged, at the beginning of the campaign, the day, no, it was the Sunday, the Sunday following the primary, we bought a half hour on Channel 6, WCSH, live television, really live, and had the five candidates on for a short presentation from each one with Frank moderating the program.

CB: This is time that you bought, that the party bought?

DN: The party raised the money, bought the time.

CB: Can you remember how much that was?

DN: I think the cost of the program was something like two hundred bucks.

CB: For half an hour of TV time?

DN: A half hour, yeah.

CB: What time during the day was this?

DN: It was around 6:00 I think, on a Sunday afternoon. I was in 'CSH not too long ago and looked at some of their old, they have a little exhibit case in the lobby, and they have some of the early equipment, cathode ray tube and that, microphones, and one of their early rate schedules. That took me back. And as I recall it was about two hundred dollars for that. And Frank was the moderator. Today it would be dismissed as talking heads dull television, but it was the first time that anybody in Maine had been able to see their candidates and particularly for a large number of people to see Democrats. We were eager to present them, one, as a team, and two, as an attractive group of people, and that came across loud and clear. It was a very good program, and Ed turned out to be an absolute natural. I've not worked with anybody who had a better sense of timing than he did. We told him how much time he had on the air, he would finish practically on the second when he was supposed to finish with his final punch line.

CB: I forgot, what was, I think Frank Coffin described that when we met at Ed Muskie's house this summer, but it was, wasn't he the moderator, he was the moderator, right? Or the questioner?

DN: Frank introduced everyone. And one of my favorite stories about Frank involved that day. We all met, it was all last minute, the primary had been the previous, in the beginning of the week, and here it was Sunday and gathering these folks together, none of whom had ever been on television or ever used the medium. I was the only one with any experience in the campaign with radio or television, so we brought them all together out at Henry Benoit's house in Cape Elizabeth. Henry was the owner of A. H. Benoit Company, and, wonderful old guy, at that time a, always looked as if he just stepped out of a band box; very distinguished looking ardent Democrat. And he hosted us at his house so we could work. Met briefly, agreed on the format for the program, and then went off into separate corners to work on the scripts for the individual candidates and Frank and I to work on the introduction and closing. Well, Henry was the consummate host and he offered people drinks and Frank was sitting typing away on a typewriter at his script and he had a glass and Henry kept coming by and refilling Frank's glass and he would take a sip

CB: With what?

DN: With whiskey. And Frank would take a sip, well, Frank's ability to speak is affected by alcohol very quickly. He really doesn't, he's not drunk but just a glass and he has trouble pronouncing. Well, he'd had a few and we got to the studio and Frank went on and opened the program, (*mimicking slurred speech*) "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Frank Coffin." Well, it was hilarious for me in the control room. Viewers wouldn't have known the difference and it really didn't look that bad, but he kept slurring ever so slightly the people he was introducing. (*Slurring*) "Now I want to introduce our candidate for the United States Senate, my good friend Paul Fu'um." And when it came to Ed Muskie, "My good friend E' Muskie." But the program went extremely well and closed with, Ed was the wrap up, Paul opened it and then we had, I think we went Jim and Tom and Ken, and then Ed wrapped it up for the candidates and Frank closed it. In fact I think Ed really closed it without any remarks by

Frank. And then we had told the wives who were all there, as soon as they're through, you, they were in the studio but off to the side, you walk onto the set and greet the candidates and just talk, just go and talk. And at that point we had the cameras pulled back to show the set with the candidates and their wives talking and put up the credits, and the announcer closed it out. So you had these very attractive candidates talking seriously about issues to the voters, it was the first time this had ever happened in Maine, and then finishing up with this sort of warm family scene, and it was a great start.

The other thing we did was to contract for radio time. And we bought, immediately, no, the last three weeks of the campaign, we purchased time on most of the radio stations in the state in three sections: early morning in the 6:00 - 7:00 AM period, noon to 1:00 PM, and 5:00 - 6:00 PM just before the evening news. Five minute blocks of time. And in each of the stations we had three candidates, Congress, governor and Senator. And we rotated them so that each of them had five five minute programs in the morning... We'd do this Monday through Friday for three weeks, each of them had five five minute programs in the morning, five at midday, and five in the evening, and each one targeted for the audience.

CB: You were the coordinator of all these T.V.?

DN: Coordinating for these, for the radio and television

CB: So your background in radio and T.V. must have really helped.

DN: That helped a great deal, and helped some in the writing for them, for the radio scripts particularly, and if not writing originally, editing so that they, people could know what they were talking about, that is, the listener could grasp what they were talking about. Then

CB: Was there a real difference between the way the candidates, like Ed Muskie or the others would write and, well, what shape it had to be in to carry over radio or T.V.? I imagine, you had to change it I imagine.

DN: You had to do some things with it. It, interestingly enough, it was not hard with either Jim Oliver or Ken Colbath because Jim had a kind of stump style that translated well, short declarative statements, that translated well into radio, and Ken Colbath was a very laconic individual and also tended to talk in short declarative sentences. You always ran into problems with the lawyers and had to do a lot of shortening and, Ed was pretty good, his debating training at Bates stood him in good stead. Tom we had to work on some, and Paul, Paul was pretty good although we had to do some work there to get him to simplify some of the language, and in short enough and clearly organized enough sentences that people could really catch it listening to it. We also coordinated the purchase of campaign materials, bumper stickers, brochures, novelties like buttons and matchbooks which were very popular in those days.

CB: What kind of financial war chest did you have to work with? How much money did you have to work with, and then how did you divide it up among the candidates?

DN: The total campaign, I think this probably excluded my salary and operating expenses for the office, but the total campaign in that year was twelve thousand dollars.¹

CB: Really. And you had to divide this among four candidates.

DN: Five candidates essentially.

CB: Five candidates, right.

DN: Ed had some money on top of that and a fair amount of the campaign funds came from Ed. First for his campaign, he had the support of a lot of Republicans from, stemming in part from the kind of internecine warfare in the Republican party, and in part from his experience heading the OPS in Maine where he had gotten to know a number of business people throughout the state and they liked him, felt he

End of Side One
Side Two

CB: Okay, so you had twelve thousand to play with, plus money that Ed Muskie had. How did you distribute it?

DN: Well, we had made up a budget and the budget was essentially directed at the radio time purchases, some television, and the advertising. And that included not only the newspaper advertising and some radio advertising, not very much radio advertising other than those programs, and some television advertising, again not very much in the way of spots, and some money for out of pocket expenses. But the candidates or their supporters bore most of the expense for travel and there were no paid staff essentially other than I.

The money was divided up pretty much on the basis of the budget which was based on state-wide versus congressional district costs, and there were some struggles. Paul Fullam felt that he wasn't getting as much money as he should, Jim Oliver complained from time to time, Tom and Ken never complained, but some money was siphoned from Ed's campaign into Paul's campaign. I don't think we siphoned anything into Jim's campaign. But that was, it was pretty much agreed upon by the candidates and Frank and most of it flowed through the state committee. It was very

I do have to tell you one anecdote in connection with this. I don't know whether you ever ran into Louis Labbe, Brunswick? Louis was a baker by trade and he was the state committeeman from Cumberland County. They used to divide up Cumberland County, state committeeman, state committeewoman. Portland got the state committeewoman and Brunswick got the state committeeman, took care of the two ends of the county. And Louis was the state committeeman

¹ The actual campaign expenditure was about \$18,000.

from the county and was the treasurer and had been the treasurer. Well, in most years during his time as treasurer, he didn't see much money. There was a little came and a little went out. Then Frank Coffin became chairman and Louis was the treasurer still, and all of a sudden the budget went up like this, and from Louis' point of view, it was absolutely enormous. But he saw money coming in in greater volumes than he'd ever seen. At the same time he saw the bills coming in. I'd supply him with information on what the outstanding bills were and when he had a meeting of the state committee, Louis would get up and give his treasurer's report. And the report would go about like this: "We have receipts of five thousand six hundred and thirty nine dollars and expenditures of eight thousand twelve hundred and so many dollars, by which we've got a deficit of....." And you just saw him standing there with visions of going to jail. And he somehow got through the campaign.

CB: Now the election at that time was held in the first week of September, right?

DN: September, second week in September.

CB: So you're really talking about, when was the active campaign period? In August?

DN: You started right, well, you really had no respite. You started right after the primary in June and you were out straight, the kind of campaigning varied, but you were out straight through the summer and into September. The big concentration was that last three weeks, and you really had to make a drive in September right after Labor Day. Labor Day was sort of the kick off for the final drive, but you'd been out going to towns, going to field days and different events through the whole summer period.

CB: One practical question. How did the candidates like Muskie and Oliver and the others, how did they make a living while they were campaigning? It must have been very difficult.

DN: Well, Jim was a real estate wheeler dealer by that time. He had bought up a good bit of land in Cape Elizabeth, I think it may have been during the war or immediately after the war, knowing that it was going to be very valuable. And he sold it off very cleverly and shrewdly over the years. And he had income to support him. Paul, of course, was on the faculty and he could run in the summer and it didn't interfere, so his income was taken care of. Ed had to scrimp on the basis of income from his law practice, and some of it came in just by Marjorie Hutchinson continuing to do the work on collections and things like that. Ken Colbath had his business that his wife ran pretty much, and Tom Delahanty had a law practice and he was in a partnership so he still had some income coming in.

CB: Now, were you involved in the legislative races as well, the state legislative races?

DN: Only to the extent of working with the county committees and the town committees on getting people to run, number one. And number two, supplying them with material and making sure that they were plugged in in the campaign schedule, with heavy emphasis in those days, very different from now in that it was a small number of people and they literally were working

primarily for the party. And therefore everybody was in the same boat and they were all pooling their efforts. And a lot of our work involved helping them, getting materials to them, providing support. We didn't do any individual campaign work for candidates at the local level.

CB: So, did you have any sense before the September '54 election that Muskie was going to win and, you know, did you have any feel for how the campaign was going?

DN: Well, the campaign was going very well and the crowds were getting more and more responsive and larger as Ed campaigned. And we had a sense that, well, from our point of view there was an off chance that we could win, but we didn't really believe it would happen.

CB: The governorship or any of the other races?

DN: The governorship, maybe the second district, maybe, but less likely, the first district, and our big problem in the second district was getting Tom Delahanty to spend some time campaigning. He really, he'd gotten into it reluctantly and didn't feel he had a chance and really was putting his name up to help Ed and Frank and company, but not with any great passion to run, and it was very late in the campaign when he decided that, well, gee, maybe he ought to work and try to win. I don't think he would have won anyway because we still had some work to do in terms of building credibility of the candidates at that level. The governorship, Cross was fairly unpopular. He was the kind of person who, very stodgy and not very good in relating to rank and file voters. And he had a penchant for putting his foot in his mouth, always saying something very insensitive. There was a hurricane not long before the election and Cross went out to look at the results of the hurricane and came back and said to the reporters it wasn't as bad as we thought it was going to be.

CB: So everybody who suffered damage got mad.

DN: Resented that. And Dave Stevens was the highway commissioner at the time and he had made himself very unpopular. He was very bright, very able public servant, but very arrogant. And they had cut aid to town roads at the state level and that had created a lot of resentment in the smaller communities. And the governor backed Stevens and showed no sign of bending on the question of aid to the towns for roads, which in those days was the equivalent to state aid for schools today. And there were some, Cross kept trying to avoid and managed to avoid a debate and we indulged in some game playing on that. Once Ed and Cross turned up in Rockland at the same time and they sent notes back and forth challenging him to debate, and that created a lot of interest. And we had a sense that, yeah, maybe we could win that governorship, but we didn't believe it. The Saturday before the election Lionel Lemieux wrote a famous, for us a famous, political column in the Lewiston Journal. Be worth getting out of here.

CB: It's probably in the scrapbooks.

DN: It's in the scrapbook, but take a look at it because the opener on it went something like this: the Democratic campaign for governor, which at one time threatened to become a tidal wave is

turning out to be a mere ripple on the surface of the state's political waters. After which we forever referred to Lionel as "Ripples" Lemieux.

CB: Well what did he mean by that? Did he?

DN: Well, he meant that he had the sense at a couple of points in the campaign that Muskie, that the Democrats were going to sweep away the Republicans in a tidal wave, but it was just a little ripple on the surface and he didn't think we were going to win. We didn't really. I remember election night Frank and I were in Lewiston, I'd voted and then came into Lewiston to the headquarters, and mid-evening the returns were coming so that it looked as if we might actually have a chance of winning and we headed for Waterville, for the old Elmwood Hotel, and got there in time for the celebration.

CB: Do you think your newspaper background had any bearing on relations of the candidates or the party committee with journalists? I mean, you mention Lemieux and others who would be covering your campaign.

DN: I think it helped in terms of the party and the party office relating to them. I think that with respect to the campaign there were some things that I understood about mechanics that helped in terms of news releases and where to send things and timing of releases. But I think that in terms of the candidates and the reporters, it was much more the way they related to the reporters. And they were much more favorably disposed to the reporters, liked them, enjoyed spending time with them, whereas the Republican candidates tended to look askance at the reporters, even reporters for the Republican papers.

CB: Why is that? Was there a difference in the political make up of the journalists who were covering, I mean, were a lot of them Democrats, or was this just a?

DN: No, the only Democrats, well the only avowed Democrat that I can recall among the reporters at that time is Floyd Nute who was the UPI correspondent at the State House. Bob Crocker, I think he may have been a Democrat but I think he was really more of an independent. Lemieux and Penley at that time were both, I think, were both essentially Republicans. And Doc Arnold was a real independent and Peter Damborg's associations were almost all Republican. But it's a matter of personality when you think of the candidates. Margaret Chase Smith was then as later protected by Bill Lewis, who absolutely distrusted the press. And they tended to like Margaret but not be able to get very close to her. Both Robert Hale and Cliff McIntire were very stodgy stiff people. Nice people but not likely to warm up to, warm up the reporters. Burt Cross was regarded as a stick in the mud, and Charlie Nelson, well, Charlie was Charlie and not somebody that they felt very close to. It's generally speaking my experience that for the most part, particularly in the '50s and the '60s, the Republicans were far less attractive to reporters as human beings. They weren't relaxed; they didn't enjoy the politics as much. There were exceptions to that.

CB: To what do you account that difference?

DN: I think part of it is the fact that the Republican was on the whole the party of conservatives in keeping things as they are. And the people who tended to rise to the top were folks who were either very safe, very staid and steady, the Bob Hales, the Burt Crosses, or manipulators whom people didn't trust, the Ralph Owen Brewsters.

CB: What was the name again?

DN: Ralph Owen Brewster, who nobody ever believed. And then occasionally a Fred Payne or a Margaret Chase Smith who was well liked, they were well liked by the press. And I think that a conservative party, whether one's talking about the Republican party in Maine or the Democratic party in some of the southern states, the conservative party will tend to get people who are not as warm and open and as tolerant as reporters are apt to enjoy.

CB: How would you compare the Republican Party in the early '50s to, say, the Republican party right now? I mean, it seems to me that the Republican Party in many instances has sort of gotten wise to the ways of the media. Don't you think?

DN: Oh, sure. They're much more... Well, things have changed drastically in a couple of ways. One is that the party leadership today, the people who hold office, tend to be younger and much more flexible as individuals. Whatever one thinks of their political philosophies, Bill Cohen, Jock McKernan, Olympia Snowe are much more relaxed and easy and tend to have the same interests as many of the reporters. The second big change is that you have many more professionals, PR professionals, handling their media relations and it's regarded as a science. And there's a lot of time, attention and money spent on that aspect of their activities. That's a big difference and that's affected the Democrats also, but I think that personality characteristics have changed less with the Democrats.

CB: Now, so, now, the other thing I want to compare is the state of party unity in the early '50s as compared to today in the Democratic Party. My impression is that in the early '50s you had a stronger sense of party loyalty, of working for the Democratic Party, than you do today. You know, it's much more fractured today, more sort of groups that, you know, use litmus tests of acceptability and things of this nature.

DN: I suspect, I don't know this to be a fact but let me give you my impressions. First, a fact that's important, the major defining event for the Democrats in many ways in Maine was not so much the 1954 election as it was the 1952 election. The 1952 election, presidential election, meant an end to the Democratic national dominance. Eisenhower was elected, that ended twenty years of Democratic dominance on the national level and at that time that meant the end of a lot of patronage that came from the federal government: post offices, the marshall's office, collector of customs. There were several other court positions that went with it that were all part and parcel of the patronage, plus jobs in Washington and at the county level and the, oh, things like OPS and, oh goodness, the Farmers' Home Administration and some others. And that coincided with the aging of the folks who had been dominant in the party in Maine through the

'30s and the '40s. On the whole, they had reached the point where they were not, they were both pessimistic about the chances of winning elections, and they were more concerned with the party as a vehicle for making patronage decisions than they were as a vehicle for winning elections.

Fifty-two, that's gone. New people came in and your post war generation took over. Lucia and Ed were elected to the national committee in 1952 and people saw it going down the drain. They were brand new and a lot of the people who had stayed in the party, stayed active in the party for the patronage, either directly or indirectly, lost interest. So it opened the way for participation by a whole group of younger people. The other thing, and this is my impression thinking back on those years, there was a lot more clarity and unity within the Democrat party and within the society as a whole on what the important issues were and where one stood on those issues. And a much higher level of comfort about the nature of the American society, and that translated into a lot more general civility in political discourse.

CB: Oh, you mean there was more civility in the early '50s than there is today?

DN: Oh yeah, much more tolerance of difference of opinion. And then I think one has to give a lot of credit to Ed Muskie and Frank Coffin in particular, who were the leaders, because they came in and the people who came in with them did not say, we want only the new people and you old fogies who have been around, move out. They did not apply litmus tests and as a consequence they built a party that had a rather remarkable mix of old and new. And it wasn't a power struggle to control the state committee and it wasn't a power struggle to control the legislative delegation. The third advantage they had in terms of sense of unity was that they were building. They hadn't achieved success, they were in the process of achieving and when times are lean and you're making some headway and you can see the progress, but you haven't arrived and you're not solidly in power, it's a lot easier for everybody to work together. Today there isn't the unanimity about the nature of the American society or the values of the society. The problems appear to be a lot less tractable and as a consequence there's a lot more anxiety and a lot more tendency to blame others. And it's easy to spot that when it comes to the current round of Japan bashing, but it also goes on within the society. You see it in Augusta now all the time.

CB: You mean between, what, between Republicans and Democrats, or . . . ?

DN: Within the Democratic Party, between the young and the old, the people with very different views on what needs to happen. It plays itself out most dramatically in issues like the gay rights, or abortion rights. It played itself out in respects over the involvement in Vietnam and to a lesser degree but still there in connection with the Gulf War; people taking very hard positions and litmus tests. And you see it, you could see it in connection with the caucuses, applying litmus, very narrow litmus tests to the candidates in terms of so-and-so did this, therefore is not acceptable, so-and-so did that, therefore is not acceptable. And the other, so you've got . . .

CB: This never happened in the early '50s?

DN: Oh, there were struggles, obviously there were struggles on issues, but people tended to come together and they didn't go off into separate camps and you didn't have.... There were tensions between the candidates; Paul Fullam felt that Ed Muskie was not liberal enough, that he was too conservative on some points. Jim Oliver felt that Ed was too conservative on some points, missing the fact that Ed was very conservative in his rhetoric and every bit as liberal as they were in terms of his policies. He simply, he spoke a language that translated his programmatic interests into terms with which even his moderate to conservative friends could identify with, and from time to time I think both Paul and Jim got trapped in the rhetoric.

The, I think that, one of the other factors that's changed the society enormously has been the growing importance of telecommunications in campaigns which has meant more and more decisions being made by voters in isolation, not as parts of groups. And up to the early '50s, early and mid-'50s, people tended to make their political decisions not so much on reading in the newspapers, which is not, doesn't have the kind of immediacy and the pressure that television in particular has. They tended to make their decisions based on kind of group consensus, whatever group they identified with, and they tended to identify either with the Republican Party or the Democratic Party or the trade union or other farm group, or their community. Now it's very immediate and the pressure is on in terms of the media coverage and manipulation of that. And if you couple that with the lack of consensus in the society as a whole, people tend to fragment and their special interests tend to move to the fore and litmus tests are therefore applied.

And then, because, this is where the money issue becomes important, money and power. It's not just the money; it's the power of being in office. There has grown up an enormous importance of staying in office, even though the turnover rates are fairly substantial, people tend to want to stay in office and the focus has become more and more the power of the office. I'm troubled by this, frankly, in connection with the legislature and the gubernatorial fights. So much of the focus is primarily on who's controlling the strings, who's controlling the exercise of power in Augusta, and less of it is focused on how do we solve this problem and what are the policy alternatives. There's a mask of talk about policy alternatives but it's not really policy alternatives, and probably the best example of that's been the fight over workers' comp. They've talked about everything but the central issue, which is how do you reduce the risk of accident and damage and how do you speed up the treatment, recovery and rehabilitation and return to work for the workers. It's not the benefits, that's not the issue at all. But that is not, they've been spending their time fighting over the benefits and the insurance rates, which are the symbols of power rather than the central issue for the workers.

CB: Well, don't you think trying to resolve that issue would be in the interests of both sides?

DN: Yeah, but they're so, it's so much a matter of jockeying. Go up there and just listen to them. And most of it is around the issue of who's doing what to whom, and who's gaining in the power game. Well that I think is related to a much, the stakes are much higher, the incumbency is much more important in terms of maintaining your position because of access to the media, access to money. And the fact that people are in office and are less dependent on the party for support means that they tend to be on their own more and they form shifting coalitions. We're

becoming more and more like the Middle East in terms of our politics. And I think that's an enormous difference.

And if you look at the relationship, or lack of relationship, between the state committee and the legislature today you've got a very good illustration of what the problem is. And it's neither, to the advantage of neither party, but they sit and snipe at each other regularly. And often, and don't get together to start focusing on what I would say is both the constructive agenda for the voters, the citizens, or a constructive agenda for the party in terms of maintaining itself as an effective force and able to gain some more control in an appropriate way in the legislature. It's a societal change, it's a technological change and it's the inevitable problems that you run into as parties mature. Democrats today in Maine are facing some of the same problems, different cast of characters, but some of the same problems Republicans had in 1952, '54.

CB: You think there's sort of dry rot within the Democratic Party?

DN: Yeah, I think essentially in terms of the legislative leadership. I think John [Martin] and Charlie [Pray] really, John is a very close long time friend of mine, but I don't think John really has a grasp of what's going on. Or if he, he probably has an intellectual grasp of it but he doesn't know how to deal with it.

CB: Now, back in the '54 campaign, I mean, obviously you were faced with an overwhelming Republican registration. Did, were you at all concerned with developing a sort of, trying to get a cross-over vote? I mean, were you directly involved in that and what did you do?

DN: Well, I was not, except in terms of a general strategy, I was not so much involved in that. That was by far the most important thing that Ed Muskie was engaged in.

CB: I know there was a Republicans for Muskie effort.

DN: Oh yeah, Ike and Norris Friend from Newport and

CB: Neil Bishop was involved.

DN: Neil Bishop, who felt that he single handedly elected Ed.

CB: Was Stanley Tupper in that group?

DN: I don't, no, I don't, Stan was not involved in that at that time. No, Stan's father, however, was an active Democrat from Boothbay Harbor.

CB: Oh, is that right?

DN: In fact, Stan's father is still living, a great old guy.

CB: Because we had, Lois had come across some reference to Tupper in the files and she thought it was Stanley Tupper.

DN: Well, there's an Asa Tupper. She needs to look at it. And my memory may be wrong on this, but Stan was always, I remember Ed was taken around Boothbay Harbor by Asa, Asa was a prominent and respected Democrat in that community. He was in the insurance business and well liked and well respected by Republicans as well as Democrats. Stan had decided that if he was going to get anywhere, he would have to be a Republican so he did not follow his father and become a Democrat. He, my memory's failing me on this, but he was Sea and Shore Fisheries commissioner at one time and I

CB: Stanley Tupper.

DN: Yeah, and I can't remember, I think it was, he was commissioner under Cross and he probably, yes, and his term overlapped I think with Ed's. In those days the commissioners were appointed for fixed terms that did not coincide with the governor's term. So you had people who were in office and carried over and then you got to appoint, reappoint them or their successor. And it seems to me that Stan was commissioner of Sea and Shore Fisheries under Burt Cross and carried over into the Muskie governorship and then went back to practicing law. And Ronny Green, who was a professional in the department, was appointed commissioner. I think that's the way it worked. And Stan's name may have cropped up, matter of fact, it wouldn't surprise me if somewhere in the files from the '54 campaign that there was some quiet work by Stan on behalf of Ed or communication, but I don't think he was publicly involved. But Ed's campaign focused very hard on the Republicans and independents.

CB: Now, how did he do that. I mean, how would he go after Republican votes?

DN: He did it in a couple of ways. One was recruiting and encouragement of Republicans in the Republicans for Muskie group. The other was to be very careful in his speeches to attack not the Republican voters but to attack the Republican Party for having deserted. It'd be, hadn't thought about this for awhile, but it would be interesting to go back and look at some of those speeches and see how he dealt with the question, how did he label, how did he describe the problems that were attributable to Republicans. Now of course one of the big pitches he made was the importance of two-party government and *ad nauseam* we had to listen to his two-party government speech.

CB: Well, Ed said it was a theme that you could work any number of ways.

DN: Oh, yeah, but he usually worked it one way.

CB: Well now, did the other candidates pick up on this, and did you personally get involved in that sort of thing, or, I mean, in terms of developing themes and so forth?

DN: We were all involved. Fairly small group and there was a lot of brain storming about

themes, speeches, topics and the like. And some writing. And with Ed it was give and take, with Ken Colbath it was picking up on things that we supplied, Tom pretty much the same, Paul tended to go his own road and so did Jim. Jim was the Tom Harkin of our camp.

CB: To the extent of what, he was outspoken, or?

DN: The populist. And his view of how you beat the Republicans was to “bash the bastards over the head,” that’s just the way he tackled it. And Ed’s, Ed kept pumping that theme, I remember, we got some statistics on population losses and economic health of the counties pointing out that the poorest counties in the state and the ones that were doing the worst were the most Republican in enrollment; driving that sort of thing home. Driving home the way the Republican legislature behaved in excluding the Democrats from any kind of participation, ineffective management of committees, and the like. I think that

CB: What I’d like to do, Don, this tape is running out. I’d like to, and I know you’ve got to go pretty soon, but I’d like to follow through after the election or finish off the election and then follow through into the period when Muskie’s governor and you’re involved with his administration, so we’ll do that next time, okay?

End of Interview