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Charest, Norman oral history interview

Mariah Pfeiffer

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Interview with Normand Charest by Mariah Pfeiffer

Interviewee

Charest, Normand

Interviewer

Pfeiffer, Mariah

Date

July 10, 2006

Place

Berlin, NH

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Audiocassette

Biographical Note

Normand Charest grew up in Berlin, New Hampshire, where his father and grandfather worked in paper mills. Charest worked one summer in the Bermaco mill and decided he would not continue in the industry. He was self-employed, then, for 30 years: he ran a Radio Shack, did freelance photography, consulted for renewable energy, and managed rock and roll bands. Since 1991, Charest has worked as an economic development director for Berlin, facilitating new business or business expansion.

Scope and Content Note

This interview covers the significance of the Androscoggin to Berliners: industry, recreation, and revulsion; River pollution; working in the Berlin paper mill: Charest's experience and the appeal of life-long mill work; the business of the paper mill: products and production processes, the industry's decline in New England; the impact of the decline on Berlin; Charest's 30 years of self-employment: his occupations and their meaning to him; Berlin's economic future: Charest's vision for growth, Berliners' attitude towards business risks, young people leaving Berlin, and prison construction plans; economic regional differences within New England; environmentalism: Charest's interest, other Berliners' mistrust; Charest's experience in the 1970s; Charest's philosophy of political engagement; Berlin's identity: immigrant roots, Catholicism, Charest's relationship to his French background; and Charest's relationship to his children.

General Notes

The recording picks up noise from a nearby road. Once, a passing canoe trailer drowns the interview.

ANDROSCOGGIN RIVER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Q: This is Moriah Pfeiffer with Normand Charest. So basically I just wanted to get a sense of your experience growing up in Berlin and what you remember early on from the river, if you could talk a little bit about that.

A: Well, in a way the river was the main artery of our lives, because of the fact that just about all of the wood that went into the paper mills, and the paper mills employed the majority of the people. So without the river, you know, the river was seen not as it is seen today, as something beautiful, as something recreational interests, but it was the lifeline of our industry. And as a kid, north of Berlin the river was clogged with logs, and south of Berlin it was filthy with sewage and all the chemicals that they paper mills dumped in the river. So the river played more than one role. And it also at times played the recreational role. In the winter time, for example, they had winter carnivals, and although that was before my time, I don't remember that, but I heard stories from my dad where they had horse races on the river and those types. And I was in on the very tail end of the fact that they used to harvest ice from the river, too, and just about where we're sitting right now there was a huge ice house that would take blocks of ice. Generally speaking, this river will freeze to about three feet, so they had giant blocks of ice, and they used horses and dragged them up to the ice house.

So the river played a lot of roles, but it did not really get any respect. Because the minute it got into Berlin, you know, all the sewage of the city went into the river, and like I said, all the discharge from the mills contaminated it. The river stunk south of Berlin, it killed all the fish, and those that it didn't kill you certainly didn't want to eat them. And it even reached a point in I would say the fifties and sixties where south of Berlin the river wouldn't even freeze anymore, there was so many chemicals and hot water going in the river. And it would foam, so at times you'd have almost a foot of foam floating on the river. And when the wind would come up, this foam would fly off the river. And it stunk.

Q: What kind of things would people say about it?

A: Back then?

Q: Yeah.

A: Well, people would sort of complain, but it was one of those things, it was like the air pollution that we had at about the same time. You know, you kind of, it's part of your livelihood, you rationalize it being that way, so we used to rationalize the smell by saying it was the smell of money. And it was the same with the river, you know, it was

just a sacrificial lamb to a way of earning a living.

Q: Was your family involved in mill work?

A: Yeah, both my, my grandfather worked in the paper mills, my father spent almost his entire life in the mills, and I spent on summer.

Q: Oh yeah? How'd that summer go?

A: Well, it taught me that I didn't want to work there. It maybe was a valuable lesson.

Q: Why exactly?

A: Well, at the time the mill produced more than paper. Of course its main product was paper, but it produced chemicals, it produced food products, and it manufactured a sewer pipe, called Bermico pipe, which was made of, you can imagine a paper core that's saturated with asphalt, and it was cooked. So they had a paper core, and you had these giant vats with hot tar, and these paper cores were put in these vats and left for long enough period of time for the core to absorb the asphalt. And then they were taken out and cooled and dried, and then they would machine the end – if you can think of today's PVC pipes, the white pipes, well these were black, because they were asphalt, but they were used in the very same way. As a matter of fact, there's many, many houses in the Berlin area that are still serviced to the sewer line using what is known as Bermico pipe. And they made drainage pipes, and they made it in different sizes, four inch, two inch sizes, and then they made the couplings and the elbows and all the paraphernalia that went with making pipe.

Now, I spent, they used to hire high school seniors during the summer to come and work in the mills, to replace the guys that would go on vacation. And my dad worked at the Riverside Mill, which was a plant adjacent to where they made these pipes, and it was a very hot summer day that he came to see me work, and we were working at the bottom of this big vat with jack hammers to break up the tar. And it had to have been well over a hundred degrees, and the bad thing about working in tar is that it gets on your skin and it burns you, you blister. And it was a horrible, hot day, and sweat pouring, and burning with blisters on your arms and legs and stuff like that. And my dad came in at lunch time to see how I was doing, and I said, not very well, I said, this is a horrible job. And he told me, he says well, you know, I hope you're not staying in the mill on my account, he said, you won't hurt my feelings if you walk away from this place. And that was my last day of work.

Q: Why do you think he said that?

A: Well, he had spent his entire life in the mill, so he knew, he'd had many more

days like that one, and I think he did it out of love. So I walked away and never came back. But I did spend most of the summer. And a little side note that's interesting, when you went to work at the Bermico Mill, they issued two products to every employee as you went into the mill. One was a set of Corbet (*sounds like*) coveralls that would snap at the ankle and at the wrist. The other item was a huge jar of Noxema, and you plastered your open skin with Noxema to prevent the asphalt dust from the manufacture of these pipes from burning your skin. And you would also cover your wrists and your ankles with it before you snapped your coveralls shut, and to this day, if there's a person within a hundred feet of me with Noxema, I can smell it and I have flashbacks of my days, I mean, so it really shocked my awareness.

Q: Wow, that's incredible. So you were wearing this big coverall all summer?

A: Yup, all summer. And the other thing is, of course they manufactured these pipes, and they manufactured a lot of them, this machine ran I believe it was around the clock, and they would stack them outdoors. So after you worked in the mill, let's say for a couple of days cleaning up or doing, if you just came in the mill, like we were substitute employees so we weren't the guys that did the operating, we were just the guys that, the gofers. So we would gofer around in the mill, and when we got that done they would have us unload boxcar fulls of these pipes and stack them outdoors. So you can imagine, now, you've been in this asphalt environment, your skin is blistering from the effects of the asphalt on your skin, and then you were in bright sun, summer sun on hot days, outdoors, blistering some more.

Q: I don't blame you for leaving.

A: It wasn't a very pleasant place.

Q: Did you have friends that were working there as well?

A: Oh yeah. You need to remember that at one time, the Brown Paper (*unintelligible*) Company, in the forties, fifties, was New Hampshire's largest employer, and it probably had one of New Hampshire's best wages. So it was not unusual – as a matter of fact it was quite common as you were in high school – that your classmates, the boys that is, classmates would drop out of school to go work in the mill, when they reached sixteen, because it was a big company, the best wages, the best benefits, a strong union. I mean once you got hired, unless you physically assaulted the foreman, you were in for life, the union would protect you. I mean, guys were known to bring in cases of beer and stash it someplace and drink on the job. And it was next to impossible to fire them.

Q: How much were the wages, relatively?

A: Well, in the fifties, which is when I worked in there, I don't really remember but it had to have been somewheres around ten dollars an hour, between eight and ten

dollars, in the fifties. I mean, when the mill closed a couple months ago, the average person working in the mill made somewhere between forty and fifty thousand dollars a year. You're talking about twenty dollars an hour plus fringe benefits, and very generous benefits. I mean, some guys had six weeks paid vacation, (*unintelligible*). But when you look at it as a whole, they were probably earning twenty-five, twenty-six dollars an hour. So even in (*unintelligible*), I would think that adjusted for inflation, that's the way it was in the fifties also, in the fifties dollar, it was extremely good wages.

Q: So when did the mills start downsizing, or when was the peak I guess?

A: It peaked just before the Great Depression, or during the Depression. In a way, the mill struggled from the time of Depression until (*unintelligible*) closed its doors. I changed ownership several times, and it's been in decline for a long time. And you know, it's foreign competition, it's the fact that our trees take somewhere around fifty years to grow before you can really harvest them, because of the climate. In more southern climates, trees grow in twenty to thirty years to that same size. And it's the fact that where these mills are being built, number one, they have the latest of technologies, practically no environmental laws, people are earning fifty cents a day, et cetera, et cetera. So the mill closing is part of the global economy and the impact that that's going to have.

Q: So what do you think kept the mills going for so long up here?

A: Well, we still have a paper mill. It's the pulp mill that closed. We still have five paper machines operating – God knows for how long. They stay afloat because they find niche markets for specialty papers. On the whole, these are small paper machines so they can cater to small orders and small customers. I'll give you an example, I have a daughter and son-in-law that worked for West (*unintelligible*) Paper Company up until a couple years ago, and they were in Kentucky and working at a mill that was approximately the same size as this one. At its peak, this mill produced somewhere between eight hundred and a thousand tons of paper a day. Now, it did that with eight hundred employees over here. The mill that my daughter and son-in-law worked at produced a thousand to twelve hundred tons a day, roughly the same amount, on one paper machine, not five, and with two hundred and fifty employees. And that's in this country, and that was a ten-year old mill. So you can imagine, as the technology improves, of course fewer and fewer people are needed, and that's what you're up against. The paper machines that are still running here, the newest machine in this mill was installed in the forties, so it's over sixty years old.

Q: And it's still keeping up.

A: But it's still trying to compete with these huge machines that are going two to three times the speed and are three times the size, and just can't do it. It's like the marathon runner who's fifty years old trying to keep up with the eighteen year old, it just

doesn't work.

Q: Is there just not the capital to increase the technology?

A: You know, industry is kind of funny that way, and it's definitely a fact that they did not reinvest in the mill. These companies buy mills and try to get them at a bargain price and try to extract as much capital from them as they can. They don't buy them to invest, they buy them to try to get a return on investment.

Q: Is that kind of what has been going on?

A: That's what's been going on. At one time, I forgot how many thousands of acres this paper mill owned, but it was a lot. And several divisions, like I said, they made pipes, they made food products, they made other things than just paper, and with each different owner, and there were several, I mean off the top of my head there were close to half a dozen owners over a period of fifty years, each one of these new owners, if they found somebody that was interested in buying a product line or a product, or lands or timberland or something like that, they would just sell it. It became just a cash cow. And the more that went on, and the more often that occurred, there was less and less value to the mill.

The last rape of sorts that occurred was when Frazier Paper bought the mill. They're the present owners, and the ones that just closed the mill. When they bought this mill complex, it included six hydro electric facilities on the Androscoggin. The day after they purchased the mill, they changed the ownership of the hydros and put it into a subsidiary, completely disconnected from the paper mill. So when they close the paper mill right now, they're still making money on the hydros. You know, the cynic amongst us say that the only reason they got the mill to begin with, because they bought it from a bankruptcy court, they only reason they bought the mills was not for the paper mill but for the hydros, so they could access the hydros.

But the fact that they separated them from the paper mill made the mill less viable economically. Because it used to produce roughly seventy-five percent of its own power, and paper making is very energy intensive. So all of a sudden, it was in a way paying a subsidiary of the same company, purchasing power, at the expense of the paper mill, the paper division.

Q: How has the community reacted to that?

A: I don't think the community, I mean the guys working in the mill, (*unintelligible*) react to that. I mean it's stuff that happens almost, in this country right now and for the last five to six years, I mean the story of Berlin is being repeated all across the country. Because, I mean it's car manufacturing plants that are being closed and relocated, it's food processing, I mean the story, to the point of your question, what do communities do about it, what can they do about it? It's private industry, they're not regulated, they

can do basically as they feel like it, and that's what they do. If it's more profitable to close, they close, more profitable to form another corporation and slice a piece of it off and write it off as a tax write-off, that's what they do. It's what businesses do.

Q: And about how many people lost their jobs lately?

A: Well, at one time this one company had a thousand employees, but when American Tissue filed for bankruptcy four years ago it had eight hundred employees at the time. When Frazier Paper restarted, purchased it from the bankruptcy court and restarted the mills, they had between five hundred and six hundred employees, two hundred and fifty just lost their jobs when they closed the pulp mill.

Q: And do you think, are these people staying in the area, do you know?

A: Some are going to stay, some are going to have – an important piece of information is the fact that the mean age was something like fifty-two or fifty-three. It's a very tough age for people to relocate and start a new career. A lot of them didn't even have high school education, and even if they did (*unintelligible*). To tell you the truth, I have no idea how some of them (*unintelligible*). But they're going to turn out to be the people that you see at Walmart, you know, bagging products and bringing the shopping carts back to Walmart. And they're going to go from twenty-five, twenty-six dollars an hour to eight to ten dollars an hour, with no benefits, et cetera. I don't think that the majority of the people of the region – because we have another mill just thirty miles from here that closed too, with the month, Groveton (*sounds like*) Paperboard. Now, combined, those two mills provided in rough numbers \$100 million a year of economic activity. That's not the product, that's strictly salary and the wood they purchased, roughly \$100 million a year. Now, in a county that only has thirty-three thousand people in the entire county, you suck out \$100 million out of its economy, there's going to be some repercussions down the road. Now, we haven't felt them yet, because it just happened. So, you know, there's unemployment security, people's savings, but sooner or later the contraction is going to be pretty serious.

Q: When these mills close, do they offer any sort of severance pay?

A: Yeah, some of the tenured employees had severance, some retired, some took their retirement package. But others had nothing.

Q: Just dropped.

A: Just dropped. Now, the state has come in with some federal money, et cetera, and there's training monies available for them to go back to school. But some of these people dropped out of school when they were sixteen, I mean, and now they're fifty-some-odd years old, you know, it's not a good fit.

Q: So now, you worked for the mill for one summer. What happened, what did you do after that instead?

A: I had a love of electronics, even at that point when I was in high school, I was a ham radio operator, and I went and worked for a local electronics store and worked there for three or four years, and then I started my own business, I was self employed for thirty and I had several businesses during that period of time, including a Radio Shack franchise. And then I did a stint as a freelance photographer, I did all kinds of things. I managed rock 'n' roll bands for about ten years. So I still have no idea what I'm going to be when I grow up. But I better decide quick.

Q: So what are you working as now, you're working with the -?

A: I actually work for a community action agency, I've been working for them since 1991 as economic development director, and I'm under contract from Tri-County (*unintelligible*) to the City of Portland as its economic development director. So I work with people who wish to start businesses, grow a business, relocate a business, and I've worked hand-in-hand with New Hampshire, the Department of Resources and Economic Development, and other groups and banks, I'm kind of a facilitator, anybody that want's to start or expand a business.

Q: How did you get involved with doing that?

A: I'm not sure. It's funny, I mean all of these jobs that I've had over the years, I consider myself an entrepreneur, and it's easy for me to think out of the box. Maybe I've never been in the box, and maybe that's my father's words that did it to me, when he questioned whether I wanted to be in the mill for the rest of my life, maybe that made me a free spirit to go out there and try different things. As I said, I've done photography, rock 'n' roll bands. In the seventies I did renewable energy consulting work in the area of small scale hydro and wind power. And I think that's, when you're in an area like this where you really have to kind of be creative to survive, having that type of personality, I mean that type of, you know, I see opportunities at every corner. I look at this river and I see opportunities. I mean everywhere I look I say, you know, we don't have to play dead because the mill has gone down, just look at the resources all around us, in the mountains and river, and there's opportunity.

I mean if I was forty years younger, I'd jump in there with both feet, and I have more ideals about how you can earn a living here than you can shake a stick at. They're not all practical, of course, they may not all work and maybe I'd starve to death. But one of the things that happen, I think that happens in a place like Berlin, and Berlin is not unique, I would suspect the same thing happened in Rumford, Maine or happened anywhere where there's a giant company that basically overshadows a community, and it does that for as long a period of time as a hundred years. That's what happened here. I think that the people lose their sense of creativity and their sense of

entrepreneurship, because there's no need of it. There's no need for education, to pursue education, because a big fat cow is there and all you have to do is milk it. And so you don't have to be educated, don't have to go to school, you don't have to think on your feet, you don't have to take risks, and you develop a community that is risk averse. So people don't like to start businesses, don't like to try things that they don't know well, because they're not well equipped to handle the malfunctions of life. I mean, they want to be sure.

You know, these guys that just lost their job were banking on every Thursday to have a paycheck there, a nice fat paycheck. When you're in business and you own a small business and you're self employed, there's no such thing, there is no guarantee. Sometimes you make money, sometimes you lose money, and you have to do with what is handed to you quite often. Well people in a community like Berlin just don't handle those types of uncertainties well, and I don't think it's unique to Berlin, I think it's unique only in the sense that any community that would have the same kind of social mix that we did finds itself in that boat. And that's what's going to make it hard to turn this around. That's the challenge, the biggest challenge we have, which translates into an economic challenge, but it's probably the human challenge of firing up people to say, you know, we need to do something here and we're going to take a risk.

I have people that come and see me that wish to start businesses or buy businesses and they say, well I own my house but I won't touch it, and I've got money in the bank but I don't want to touch it, but I want to start a business. And I say, well listen, how do you expect to do that? You need to put it on the line, really. Maybe not all of it, but a piece of it, because the bank is not in the business of taking risk. And it's a concept that's very, very hard to put through to people who have not grown up with that kind of environment.

The other thing that we're at a disadvantage of when we look at our city government, because we've been in decline for a long period of time, we went into a mode of what I call putting the wagons in a circle, because our tax base is shrinking, and the taxes keep going up, and the way that the political types react to that is by cutting services and cutting and cutting and cutting. Well, number one, you can only cut so much until you start cutting where you shouldn't be cutting. Not only is cutting inappropriate after a while, but investment is required. Now, if you and I were to walk into the city council meeting tonight, and by the way they will meet tonight, Monday night, if we were to walk into a council meeting and suggest to mayor and council that they go out and that they float a bond, let's say, for ten million dollars, and you gave them a well thought through plan of what you're going to do with the ten million dollars of investment into the infrastructure, investment for projects that will attract people to come to the region, tourists, et cetera, you would be laughed out of the chambers. They would not even give you the time of day, and that is because they too are risk averse.

And not only that, one other point that's difficult to get people to come to grips with is, if

what needs to be done is counterintuitive, then you've got a problem on your hands. In other words, you know, the pie is shrinking, there's less and less money, and you and I come in and say, let's spend money. It's counterintuitive to say you're going to spend money, but in the business world you do it all the time, and the motto is, you've got to spend money to make money. Well guess what, communities are the same, cities are the same. And right now, instead of putting the wagons in a circle and seeing how much we can cut, the city should be embarking on capital improvement programs and change its image, change its style, and go for it. Because what the hell have we got to lose, we already lost it right? But I'm not that good a salesman.

Q: What do you see as some sort of, I guess the future for the river economically? Because you mentioned that the river could be a source of something for improvement.

A: The Androscoggin in Berlin, beginning at the Northern Forest Heritage Park, heading north, goes eleven miles as far as the town of Dummer, it goes two miles in the town of Dummer. It is relatively flat water, and it has opportunities for all sorts of recreational activities, and it's right there. But unfortunately, again, people don't see it. For example, there's a restaurant that was just built about a mile from here, built within the last couple of years because the old one burnt down, it's a very successful restaurant, people come from practically all over the country to eat there, mostly because of their fruit pies, they make strawberry pies and blueberry pies and that kind of stuff. It's sure to fill a few calories. And they just built this brand new restaurant, spent over a million dollars, but you could not get them to really take advantage of the fact that they were right alongside the river. Yes, they put some big windows, from the restaurant itself you can look out at the river. But there is no deck, there is no access to the river.

The river is still seen by many as a place where you just go dump your old junk stuff off the riverbank into the river. You know, there isn't appreciation for the value. Because, again, in my entrepreneurial brain, when I see that restaurant I say, aha, what do we do, we put a pier out there, and we have service, and people can come, you can see, there's some houses along, for eleven miles along this river, there are houses, so a lot of people have boats. I mean, wouldn't they come to this restaurant, if it had a nice dock, and come and have a beer. And if not, it would give the idea, and I spoke to the owner about that.

Q: Nothing?

A: Nothing. Because he's really a dyed-in-the-wool native, who is blind. And we had to be blind to the river in a way, we had to be blind to the smell, we had to be, you know, we had to turn all of those attributes off because it was repulsive.

Q: That's an interesting way to put it.

A: You know, it's like when you look in the mirror and you got a big nose, right, I mean you can't just focus on that, because if you do you'll drive yourself crazy. But if people in Berlin just focused on the fact that they were gagging on foul air and everything else, I mean I don't know, you'd go crazy.

Q: Do you think that attitude is changing, or will change?

A: Oh, it will change, it will change. And it is changing, you know, the next generation is going to be out of that. Another sad occurrence is the fact that we've had an out migration of young people, so we're left with a low population. Most of our young people left to go to college and never come back. Maybe that's what you did, too. But that's very common, it's very common to the northern part of the North Woods region, which includes Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont and New York. We have more in common in northern New Hampshire with northern Maine and northern Vermont and New York than we do with the southern part of our own state, because the southern part of our own state of New Hampshire, which borders Massachusetts, with its interstate system and with its job opportunities in the Boston area, and the growth of that area with all the opportunities, and schools, colleges, universities, we have nothing in common with them.

Q: So what made you decide to stay here?

A: Well, I always found opportunities, didn't have to go anyplace else, I created the opportunities where I went. But you know, a lot of people would look at me and say that I was kind of weird in a way, with different things I do, it wasn't always well accepted either. But those, I think many of the people who thought the way I did or saw the world in the same light that I did, left. I just happened to be, I've been lucky enough to be able to eke out a living here. And there were some pretty lean times, too. I mean, I went probably fifteen years without even health insurance. I mean, managing rock 'n' roll bands was fun, but not very lucrative.

Q: Yeah, you get to follow them around, but they're not going to give you much.

A: Yeah, there wasn't much for money. It was fun, I'm glad I did it, learned a lot about sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll.

Q: Got to have that experience.

A: Got to have that experience, I didn't go to college, I got it that way.

Q: So if you were to describe the river's role in your life and your family's life, how would you go about doing that?

A: It really, I mean other than quite indirectly, it had no impact really. I mean I always enjoyed the river, and at one point in my life I used to go fishing in the head

waters of the river, and watch the logs go by and stuff like that. But the river itself, I knew it kept the mills going so it was important in that respect, but I did not have, I mean my love for the river is something that occurred within the last ten, fifteen years.

Q: What happened there, how did that come about?

A: (*Unintelligible*). Woke up one day and, oh my God, there's water in that river, the wood is gone. And, I don't know, it's hard to explain in one's lifetime why all of a sudden we discover things that were right under our noses all the time. I got all wrapped up in, believe it or not, I got wrapped up in the seventies movement and in the environmental piece quite a bit, and although I was not of that generation, I adopted it. And those of you who missed the seventies and the sixties, missed a great time. You did, I mean I don't know if it'll ever happen again. But to me, the potential of this country – and some people see it as a very turbulent era, and maybe it was, but to me it was the country at its best, yet to most people, they look at it as, you know, you had Vietnam going and you had protests and you had marches and you had the Civil Rights movement and you had all of that, but you had life, you had energy, and you had purpose and you had hope for change. I mean, you didn't have George Bush, so things were good. And it was a privilege to have lived through that era. And even in the music of the day, which I think someday will be as popular, the music of the sixties and seventies will become the classic music of future generations.

Q: What kind of things were going on up here with the environmental movement?

A: Not much. They shot environmentalists right at the town line. I mean, how could you support people who threaten your livelihood? And it was kind of strange in a way, because the Appalachian Mountain Club has one of its Maine operations fifteen minutes from Berlin, and tried, that's how I met Marcel, by the way, he was working for AMC, and AMC became enemy number one in Berlin when it interceded and became an intervener in the re-licensing of the hydro electric facilities on the Androscoggin River, and that did not set well with the locals because it was seen as outsiders (*unintelligible*).

See, for a long, long period of time, and you still have some people think that way, they saw the biggest threat to their livelihood and to the paper companies coming from the outside, and coming from the environmental community. Not realizing that the threat was internal, and the threat was corporate and it was all about profits. And they didn't realize that at all, and I -

End of Side A

Side B

Q: ... did you?

A: Not really. I expressed my opinion, and I'm the type of guy that, I don't feel like you have to agree with me, so it's okay to disagree. I'll argue my point, though, and quite often people don't understand that. I mean I'll stick to my guns, and I don't mind getting involved in a good argument about something, but that doesn't mean that after we're through arguing about it and we still disagree that I'm going to hate you for it, because you have the right to your opinion and so do I. But some people never get over it. And I got involved during the Vietnam period with anti war demonstrations, had some in town, that went over like a lead balloon too, you know. But that's okay, people get over it. I think if you bring balance to your activities, sooner or later all is forgiven. As long as there's some balance. I mean if you just do it to be mean, to be destructive, I mean that's one thing. But you occasionally luck out and do something positive. That sort of confuses the masses.

Q: Do you feel like people are coming around to that point of view a little more now?

A: Oh, there's no question, yeah. I don't think that people see AMC, for example, as the enemy. But that thought is still, without being prevalent, it's still there. I don't see them, as a matter of fact, Marcel I consider my friend, I've worked for AMC and still, other people that are still with AMC, I think that some of those organizations do have a hidden agenda and may very well use things such as re-licensing procedures to push their own agenda, and their agenda is not always overt. The Northern Lands Council at one point had green zoned this whole area of northern Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont and New York, and the cry at the time was that we were, they were trying to make us the playground of the east. That's a huge statement, but I can see it happening, too. Now, whether or not the Lands Council maybe has worked to make that happen, but it's such a complex and huge undertaking that it could not on its own have caused this area to become just a playground. I mean there are other dynamics going on here, such as the failures of paper companies, et cetera, et cetera. So maybe they were prophets more than conspirators.

Q: It seems like the mills have just had this overpowering -

A: Well, the mills have run a cycle, you know, steel mills have done the same thing, the fabric mills have done the same thing, the shoe industry has done the same thing. It's now paper's turn. So I don't think it's a conspiracy, I think like human beings, which has its own dynamics, its birth and life and death, that quite often industries have the same life cycle. And for the same reason that people may die before their time because they have bad habits, corporations have bad habits, they die before their time. They don't reinvest in their own infrastructure, they don't make the correct investments, they remunerate the CEOs with (*unintelligible*) amounts of money, instead of putting it back in the company. They don't make their stocks valuable enough for investors to be interested in them. I mean they make all sorts of mistakes that sooner or later brings their demise. You know, people smoke cigarettes and drive too fast, and you know,

commit suicide, a premature suicide the same way. It's part of the human experience.

Q: So, we're working for a rebirth.

A: Yeah, we're working for a rebirth. I think it's going to take a while though. I really hope to be around. Have no guarantee, but I think it would be interesting to look back at Berlin in ten years. I'm not sure what's going to happen. I have some ideas of what could happen, but I'm not sure we're going to have the wisdom to capture it. For example, the state bought over seven thousand acres to create a park here.

Q: What kind of park, would you say?

A: An ATV park, primarily. Huge potential. The federal government is going to put in a prison, another prison, big facility.

Q: There are going to be two in the area then?

A: The state and the fed. The prison's going to be the third largest public works project in the history of the state of New Hampshire. Almost \$200 million.

Q: How many jobs do you think that's going to create?

A: It's going to create somewhere between three to four hundred jobs. But it's not going to help the laid off paper mill workers because of their age, lack of education, lack of expertise, et cetera, et cetera. But the money it's going to put in the economy is definitely going to have an impact, both a positive and negative. It's also going to bring in, it's expected that sixty percent of the employees are going to be from someplace else, so it's going to bring in some new blood, some fresh ideas, some people that may have an appreciation for the river and the mountains, while we take it for granted. So there's going to be an impact from that, and there's going to be an impact on small towns because federal prisons do not hire anybody over the age of thirty-seven.

Q: Why is that?

A: Because they want them to retire in twenty years, and the retirement age is fifty-seven.

Q: Why do they want them to retire in twenty years, though?

A: Well, their target retirement is fifty-seven, so in order to get your retirement you have to be within the system for twenty years, so you have to be hired by the time you're thirty-seven so since, I mean they're making some assumption that everybody's going to want to retire, or be forced to retire, so they won't hire you if you're more than thirty-seven. So it's going to be young people, and they're going to be the baby makers,

so there's going to be, there's the future. So the impact in area schools may be quite dramatic, and that's something that, if you're going to worry about something, that's one of them.

The other thing that nobody worries about but is an area of concern on my part, only because I'm weird, I guess, is the paper mills and the loggers and all this, over that hundred years we've created a culture, almost a subculture of the American culture. We're different, there's no question. You go to northern Maine, they're different too, northern Vermont, they're different too. You're from Aroostook, you're different. And it took a hundred years for that to happen, to develop our quirks of being who we are. And it revolved a lot about the fact that they were all immigrants, a lot of them from Quebec, and they were predominantly Catholics and they were all of those factors, and so we formed a culture. And the type of work that the guys were doing, which didn't require much education and appreciation for the arts, I mean they were happy as long as they could buy a six pack of beer at the end of the day and sit there and veg out, you know, that was good enough for them.

All of a sudden we're going to have, between the two prisons, we're going to have as many people working as correctional officers as we had paper makers for twenty-five, thirty years. Now, that's going to change the culture. Not only are they going to be transients, people that come from other places, other experiences, but the job itself is a nasty job. It's a job that when I speak to a local police department, for example, and the detectives, and they tell me of the very high rate of domestic violence among correctional officers, et cetera, because you can't be in a prison where it's intimidate and be intimidated are everyday occurrences, that's how you keep the masses under control. And you can't be in that kind of environment, where people are spitting in your face, cursing at you all day, and the only way you deal with them is through brute force and intimidation, you don't leave that at the door when you leave at five o'clock, you bring that with you and it becomes part of your character. I've witnessed it, I have friends that went and worked as correctional officers, have been in there for three or four years, and I've seen the changes in their character, the way they handle their kids, the way they speak to their kids or wife. And it's not always pleasant.

Now, my crazy fear is the culture that we're going to develop is a culture of correctional officers or skinheads. That frightens me, because I think, you know, right now my neighbors are paper makers, they're basically pretty happy-go-lucky guys, you know, they like to have a barbecue on the weekends and stuff like that. If my kid throws a ball on their lawn, so what, their kid throws a toy next week on my lawn and it's okay. I have to worry what's going to happen after the culture changes and we've got one that's more uptight and is more used to negotiating their differences through intimidation. What happens when my dog goes and takes a crap on the guy's lawn, how's he going to deal with me as a human being? What's going to happen as my driving skills start failing me and I back into his brand new SUV in the parking lot and crunch his fender, how's he going to deal with me? I don't think he's going to deal with me the same way that the paper mill worker would have dealt with me, I think it's going

to be a little more stern, boisterous. And I'm concerned about that change in the culture. But I don't think anybody else is, that's my own. I haven't heard that discussed on any forum.

Q: So how would you describe the paper mill culture?

A: Paper mill culture is strong in the work ethic. Like I said, it does not appreciate the arts as much as it could or should, it's poorly educated, I suppose that goes hand-in-hand, maybe parties a little too hearty, maybe it likes to drink a little too much. But it's a common sense culture, it's not driven by some abstract philosophical theory, it's driven by practical, down to earth needs and wants and that kind of stuff. So it's going to be different. It's more accepting of its lot, you know, it won't pick up and move five hundred miles to make an extra fifty cents an hour. It will probably be buried within twenty-five miles of where it was born. That's the difference. It may have a greater appreciation for its history, maybe.

Q: Well, there were a lot of immigrants coming in. What were their cultures, exactly?

A: Well, this area right in here was known as Norwegian Village. The streets here, see, this is Main Street, the next one is Norway, the next one is Sweden, the next one is Denmark and the next one is Finland.

Q: So those are the communities.

A: Those, and when I was a kid this area here was strictly Scandinavians lived up here. The east side of Berlin was predominantly French Canadian when I was in grammar school, and it was Catholic, and it was francophone community, the pastor of the parish had established a bank, had its own doctor, they were all French speaking, you didn't have to speak English at all. I spoke no English until I went to school, and then we had half a day in French and half a day in English, the teachers were all nuns that came, most of them came from Quebec, the priests came from Canada, Quebec. We had another section of Berlin that was Irish, we called Irish Acres. There was another section that was Russian, and I don't know if you saw the Russian church, with the spires and all of that.

At the time we had a Jewish synagogue, and a relatively small Jewish community but we had that. We had a section called Cascades, all Italians. And at that time they were fairly pure, ethnic communities, and it was a no-no to hang around with those guys. And we had a small German community too, so we had just about every group. Berlin is weird in that it's like a miniature big city, you know, you go to a place like New York City, you've got all these cultures and you've got these subdivisions of people, well we did too.

Q: Do you still see that immigrant influence (*unintelligible*)?

A: Well, no, it's pretty well all dissolved now, all intermarried, and a lot of the churches have closed. See, at one time you had one, two, you had three French Roman Catholic parishes where all the services (*unintelligible*) was all in French, and you had one Irish. And it was so – I don't know if you know anything about Catholicism – but the obligation of going to church once a week on Sunday and stuff like that, well it was so ingrained in people that it had to be in French, but the pastor of our parish of the east side used to preach from the pulpit, but if you happened to go to a mass, Catholic mass now, supposed to count, in the Irish church, it didn't count. You had to come back in your own church. And the saying was, the popular saying was, "*Qui perd sa langue, perd sa foi.*" Translated, "He who loses his tongue, loses his faith." Powerful shit.

Q: So did you see the same sort of divisions going on in the mills as well, or was that more of a mixing?

A: No, the divisions were in the mill, particularly when Brown Company had it and you had eight thousand employees. They often described the French as the "niggers," and I've done that, I've described the French people in the thirties, forties, as French "niggers," which really raises eyebrows, particularly amongst blacks when you say that. Because in my mind, I don't think "niggers" are exclusively black, I think it's a social class, and usually a class that is prejudiced against, et cetera. You had, all of the leadership positions in the mill were held by English speaking individuals, all the leadership positions in the woods, in the logging part of the operations, were all Scandinavians, and the French did all the shit tasks.

Q: And your own heritage is French.

A: French, both mother and father, my mother was born in Quebec. My father was born here, but my mother was born in Quebec.

Q: So has your family experienced some of this discrimination?

A: Oh sure, I was called a stupid Frenchman and a frog, oh yeah. It builds character.

Q: Good that you can think of it that way.

A: Well, you know, that was the reality. But it's pretty well, it's still, you know, I have an old Yankee farmer neighbor who on occasion will still make a derogatory remark about, oh well, he's French you know. And we do it to ourselves, just like black people make fun about their own race. We have sayings about being French, how many Frenchmen does it take to unscrew a lightbulb, that kind of stuff. One of them is, we call it, we French the language, you know, use half and half, and things we'll say is "C'est tough est French," which means, "It's tough being French."

Q: Well, I think that's pretty much all I had to ask. Is there anything else that you think I should be -?

A: Well I think it's an overdue, I think what you need to keep in mind though, that you may not be getting, I mean this is a fairly accurate portrait of Berlin, but from my perspective, and it may not be representative. I mean, you have to keep that in mind. If you think of what I've done and my outlook on life and stuff, I'm sure if you talk to a guy that spent his entire life in the mill, he's going to have a different story to tell you than mine, and he's not going to see what happened, he's not going to see the cultural nuances in the same manner that I see them.

Q: Well that's what I'm looking for, all sorts of perspectives, because I think that's the only way you can get a full picture of it.

A: Right, right. And there are other people, I'm not unique, as I'd like to think I am, but I'm not as unique as you might think. I would say, I probably can speak for maybe ten percent of the population that see it this way. And most of the time I have more in common in my views with outsiders, strangers, people from afar, than I have with the locals. I'm not sure why. I went through a period where I really hated the fact that I had this French background, I rebelled against it. Because after I came out of school and went into the workplace, I ran into discrimination, I ran into the racial epithets and being called stupid and being called a dumb Frenchman and all that kind of stuff, and I realized that there was an element of truth in it. Because in the French community, which were predominantly paper mill workers, et cetera, they did not value education, they did not send their kids – I wanted to go to MIT so bad I could taste it, because I liked electronics and stuff, you know, and there were no scholarship programs available, there was no way to do it, and my parents didn't have the money to send me. Except for my father, one argument I remember, my father was a very mild mannered guy, and I remember him slamming the fork down on the kitchen table when I announced that I wanted to go to MIT and stuff like that, and my mother telling there's no way we can afford to do that, and him getting angry, one of the few times I ever saw him angry, saying, Well, if we really valued education we'd find a way.

So, like I said, when I went into the real world and I experienced the discrimination, I went through a period where I wanted to destroy anything and everything that looked like or resembled the French culture, and to not see any value to it because it had held me back, it closed so many doors and opportunities, and I said, you know, we should get rid of this, this is just an anchor around our necks. We can't speak correctly, we're poorly educated because of it, you know, et cetera, et cetera, we can't get jobs, we can't, you know. And unlike a black person who can't shed the color of his skin, I could shed the trappings of being French to some degree. But then I got over that, too, I got over that. And now I think it's really unfortunate that my kids don't speak French. I guess it's the abuse of any of those in the extreme. That's what sad, in my mind

anyway, about people who are overzealous about anything, whether it's religion or politics or I don't care what. It's that abuse that's wrong, it's not *the* fact, but it's the fact that (*unintelligible*) to experience. Moderation, everything in moderation. You're still young enough to practice that, to learn that at a young age, you'll live longer and happier.

Q: I hope so. And are your kids, are your kids still in the area?

A: No, I've got a daughter that moved from here to Kentucky to Texas to South Carolina, and I've got, my oldest daughter is in Vermont. So that, my oldest daughter's the one that stayed the most connected to the region and to the family. My other daughter kind of, you know, and my oldest daughter kind of rejected the transition that I went through in the seventies, you know, really didn't appreciate my lifestyle of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, and it's left a huge chasm between she and I, which is unfortunate, you know, it's a loss for both of us. But she won't talk about it. And it keeps me away from her son, my grandson, which is not good.

Q: That's a shame they didn't stay in the area too.

A: They were both working for paper mills. My son-in-law's an engineer, my daughter is just a few credits from her Ph.D. in occupational safety, and she worked for the paper mill as the safety officer.

Q: The one here?

A: No, (*unintelligible*). Now, the other one's a real estate agent, although she worked in the mill too for a while.

Q: That's interesting, that the mill thing continued through.

A: I bet you if you went into mining communities or something like that, you'd see that. I mean it's the best jobs, the best paying, so it shouldn't surprise us. It's (*unintelligible*) of us a little coo-coo that went and did, can you imagine, I mean I could have stayed in the mill, by now I'd be retired, I'd probably have a nice retirement. I'd be like some of my classmates that were in my class in high school who have a home in Florida and one up here, and they seem to have, I mean monetarily anyway, financially, they're better positioned than I am. But I think I had more fun. I mean, I wouldn't swap places with them. I think those experiences, like I said, it was a privilege being alive in the sixties and the seventies, and I don't know if we'll ever see it again. But it's definitely an experience, the Woodstocks and – to you it's nothing but a piece of history, but it was just so different. You can tell by the music, you can tell, well the music says a lot if you really listen to the lyrics, and the fashions, and just what was going on. I mean this whole thing about free love, and free love not being in a sexual piece, but just, I mean loving they neighbor and just getting along and giving everybody the benefit of the

doubt, and that whole peace thing, you know, it was for real. There was at least thirty percent of the population really thought, I mean it was a revolution. It almost worked, except for people like Richard Nixon.

Q: But we had Ed Muskie, right, working on the Androscoggin.

A: Ed Muskie was okay, Ed Muskie was okay, yeah, he was all right. We had somebody else from Maine, wasn't there a woman?

Q: I'm not sure.

A: I think right now we're in the pits. What a mess we're in now. We seem to hell bent on doing all the wrong things. I think the biggest threat to not only our existence but to our standard of living and quality of life, and we did all the wrong things to preserve it. If you have a neighbor you don't get along with, the worst thing you can do is piss him off. And then say you want to be friends? I mean, it doesn't work. It's so dumb, you know. I was listening to something on NPR this morning that said, he's a guy that just wrote a book, I forget his name, but just wrote a book and he was saying that as far as fighting terrorism, that invasion of Iraq was probably the worst thing, of all the different things we could have done, it was probably the worst thing we could do, because it gave credence to all the prophecies that (*unintelligible*) for years. You watch, you know, they're going to come and they're going to take over our space, you watch the Americans, watch, they're going to come and get our oil, you watch. They've been saying that for twenty years. And here we came, we removed all doubt. We did more for their recruitment. That's what you should be doing.

Q: Forget the Androscoggin.

A: Forget the Androscoggin, let's bash Bush. I got a Bush story for you. Bush goes to Europe and has an audience with the Queen of England, and he says to the queen, "Madam Queen, why is it everything I touch, everything I do, comes back and bites me in the ass? Why is that? My ratings go down, I try something, my ratings go down, they've never been lower, everybody hates me." And she says, "George, it's all about the people you surround yourself with, and your advisors. It's very important you get good advice, you can't do it all yourself, it's your advisors," she says, "let me show you." So she pushes a button on her desk and a door opens and in walks Tony Blair, and she says, "Tony, I have a riddle for you, I want to see how long it takes you to solve it." He said, "Yes, Queen." She says, "Your mother and father have a child, that child is neither your brother nor your sister, who is it?" Tony Blair says, "Queen, that is so simple, it's me, Tony Blair." She says, "Thank you Tony, that'll be all." So Tony leaves. She turns to George, she says, "See, George, did you see how long it took him to solve that, just like that." He says, "Well, I'm impressed, I couldn't figure out what you were talking about." She says, "Well, that's the caliber of people that you need in Washington."

So George flies back to the States, first thing Monday morning he calls in Dick Cheney, and he says, "Dick, I think I'm onto something. The queen told me that I need to surround myself with very bright, smart people, and I'm starting immediately, today, I'm starting with you. I'm going to test everybody, they need to be able to solve this riddle to stay as part of my administration." He said, "Your mother and father have a child, that child is not your brother or your sister, who is it?" "Gee, Mr. President," he's scratching his head, "I'm not sure." "Well," he says, "you've got til five o'clock to come with an answer, that's all."

So Cheney leaves the office and he's walking down the corridor and he's going, I think the president has lost his mind, but it's kind of important I solve this. He bumps into Colin Powell, he says, "Colin, can you help me. The president's on this kick of testing us, and here's the question. You're mother and father decide to have a child, and that child is neither your brother nor your sister, who is it?" Colin looks at him, he says, "Dick, that's very simple, it's me, Colin Powell." And he goes, "By Jesus, you're right, thank you." He spins around, heads for the Oval Office, knocks on the door and walks in, and he says, "Mr. President, I've got the answer to your riddle." He says, "Good, good, what's the answer?" He says, "It's Colin Powell." The president looks at him, he says, "You goddam fool, it's Tony Blair."

End of Interview
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