

Bates College

**SCARAB**

---

Edmund S. Muskie Oral History Collection

Muskie Archives and Special Collections Library

---

11-29-2001

## Billings, Leon oral history interview

Don Nicoll

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scarab.bates.edu/muskie\\_oh](https://scarab.bates.edu/muskie_oh)

---

### Recommended Citation

Nicoll, Don, "Billings, Leon oral history interview" (2001). *Edmund S. Muskie Oral History Collection*. 37.  
[https://scarab.bates.edu/muskie\\_oh/37](https://scarab.bates.edu/muskie_oh/37)

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Muskie Archives and Special Collections Library at SCARAB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Edmund S. Muskie Oral History Collection by an authorized administrator of SCARAB. For more information, please contact [batesscarab@bates.edu](mailto:batesscarab@bates.edu).

## **Interview with Leon Billings by Don Nicoll**

*Summary Sheet and Transcript*

### **Interviewee**

Billings, Leon

### **Interviewer**

Nicoll, Don

### **Date**

November 29, 2001

### **Place**

Portland, Maine

### **ID Number**

MOH 321

### **Use Restrictions**

© Bates College. This transcript is provided for individual **Research Purposes Only**; for all other uses, including publication, reproduction and quotation beyond fair use, permission must be obtained in writing from: The Edmund S. Muskie Archives and Special Collections Library, Bates College, 70 Campus Avenue, Lewiston, Maine 04240-6018.

### **Biographical Note**

Leon Billings was born in Helena, Montana on November 19, 1937. His parents were Harry and Gretchen Billings. His father was an editor and publisher of a progressive newspaper; his mother was a crusading journalist. He graduated from high school in Helena, Montana in 1955, and then attended Reed College for one year in Portland Oregon. He completed his undergraduate studies and took graduate courses toward an M.A. at the University of Montana at Missoula. Billings worked as a reporter and organizer for farm groups in Montana and California. He met his first wife, Pat, in California. They married in Montana and moved to Washington, D.C. on January 4, 1963. While in Washington, Billings worked for the American Public Power Association for three years as a lobbyist. In March 1966, he was offered and accepted a job on the Subcommittee on Air and Water Pollution on the Public Works Committee. He worked for Muskie helping to coordinate work on environmental policy. From 1966 to 1978, he served as Muskie's chief of staff. He served on the Democratic Platform Committee staff in 1968 and in 1974, was co-chairman of a Democratic National Committee task force on Energy and the Environment. He later served as President of the Edmund S. Muskie Foundation; a tax-exempt foundation endowed with a \$3 million appropriation from Congress to perpetuate the environmental legacy of Senator Muskie.

### **Scope and Content Note**

Interview includes discussions of: family background; Lee Metcalf; *The People's Voice* (progressive, co-op newspaper founded by Leon Billings' father); Mike Mansfield in relation to Billings' parents; Pat Billings; Regional Preference Bill; Dickey-Lincoln; first encounter with Ed Muskie in 1963; Ron Linton; Clean Water Restoration Act; Public Works Subcommittee; oil pollution legislation; Bill Hildenbrand; pollution legislation; Johnson's clean rivers program; 1970 Water Quality Improvement Act; Clean River Restoration Act; and Joe Moore.

## **Indexed Names**

Agnew, Spiro  
Aiken, George D. (George David), 1892-1984  
Andress, Cecil  
Billings, Gretchen  
Billings, Harry  
Billings, Leon  
Billings, Mike  
Billings, Pat  
Boggs, James Caleb, 1909-  
Califano, Joseph A., 1931-  
Carter, Jimmy, 1924-  
Cory, Gayle  
Costle, Doug M.  
Dewey, Thomas  
Ellis, Clyde  
Fallon, George  
Frazier, Willard  
Hathaway, Bill  
Hildenbrand, William F. "Bill"  
Jackson, Henry M. (Henry Martin), 1912-1983  
Johnson, Lyndon B. (Lyndon Baines), 1908-1973  
Jones, Bob  
Kennedy, John F. (John Fitzgerald), 1917-1963  
La Folette, Robert  
Linton, Ron M.  
Mansfield, Mike, 1903-2001  
McDonald, Angus  
McNamara, Pat  
Metcalf, Donna  
Metcalf, Lee, 1911-1978  
Micoleau, Charlie  
Montoya, Joseph Manuel, 1915-1978  
Moore, Joe  
Muskie, Edmund S., 1914-1996  
Nicoll, Don

Novak, Alan R.  
O'Connell, Jerry Joseph  
Poulin, Sandy  
Quigley, Jim  
Radin, Alex  
Randolph, Jennings  
Rockefeller, Nelson A. (Nelson Aldrich), 1908-1979  
Roosevelt, Franklin D. (Franklin Delano), 1882-1945  
Rowe, James  
Royce, Richard  
Sullivan, Richard "Dick"  
Udall, Stewart L.  
Wright, Jim, 1922-

## **Transcript**

**Don Nicoll:** It is Thursday, the 29th of November 2001. This is Don Nicoll interviewing Leon Billings. We are at 9 Highland Street in Portland, Maine. Leon, would you state your full name, spell it, and give us your date and place of birth, and then the names of your parents?

**Leon Billings:** Leon G. Billings, B-I-L-L-I-N-G-S, like the town in Montana. I was born in Helena, Montana on November 19th, 1937, which is my mother's birthday. My parents were Harry and Gretchen Billings of Helena.

**DN:** Did your parents grow up in Montana?

**LB:** Yes. My father was born near his mother's homestead in, on the Flathead Indian reservation in western Montana, and my mother was born on the shadow of Glacier National Park in a town called Whitefish, Montana.

**DN:** And they had stayed in Montana, growing up there?

**LB:** Yes, my great-grandfather on my mother's side homesteaded in Montana in 1877, and my grandmother on my father's side homesteaded in 1910, which in itself is an interesting story, I think.

**DN:** Oh, what . . . . ?

**LB:** The fact that a single, twenty-eight-year-old woman would put up a homestead on an Indian reservation in 1910 is something you think about a little bit.

But in any event, my father was raised in this small town, went to a boarding high school in another town, went to the University of Montana and got a degree in journalism, and started law school. And then he met my mother who had only recently graduated from high school and they essentially, against his mother's will, ran off and got married. And then [they] worked at various

sundry jobs from cleaning hotel rooms to surveying with the State Water Conservation Board and so on through the Depression until first he, and then she, went to work in the shipyards in Tacoma, Washington during WWII. And then after WWII they came back to Montana where he became the editor and publisher of probably the country's only co-op newspaper which he, and then later she, became managing editor and chief columnist and ran from 1946 to 1969.

**DN:** How did a co-op newspaper run?

**LB:** Well, just, you know the, in the days that they were in the newspaper business the Anaconda company owned, through a Shell corporation, the daily newspapers in Montana, so there was no way for progressives to get any word out to the people. So, and the Montana Power Company controlled most of the weeklies in the state through their advertising budget. So they formed a co-op because a co-op is one member, one vote, and they felt that way they could avoid dominance by the power structure in the state. It was founded by people like Lee Metcalf, the later senator from Montana, and a bunch of old left wing progressives. And it was, it was, it managed to stay independent for the thirty two years that, from 1937 when it was founded until 1969 when my dad quit.

**DN:** Now, how did they tie up with Lee Metcalf and the others to form the co-op?

**LB:** Actually the co-op was formed, my father was not involved in that. Metcalf was a young state legislator, I believe he was elected to the legislature when he was still in college, in law school perhaps. But Metcalf and a bunch of other young liberals, Metcalf actually had a bit of a silver spoon in his mouth, which most people don't know. His father was a banker. And he was bound and determined to break the stranglehold of the company, and the Farmer's Union, some leaders in the Farmer's Union, some leaders of the labor movement and so on got together and formed this co-op. Well, how they came about that idea, I have no idea. But then nine years later my dad took it over, and he and Metcalf were fast friends. I was very close to Lee Metcalf.

**DN:** Now, you were nine years old when your parents came back to Montana from Tacoma, Washington, so you spent some early years in Washington state.

**LB:** Yes, but they were, you know, pretty formative. Actually I was eight years old when we came back. And while I remember some of the WWII experience, like the death of Roosevelt and so on, it's all, I'm never sure what I remember and what my mother told me.

**DN:** And when you came back at the age of eight, did your father immediately start work for the paper, or were there other -?

**LB:** Yeah, no, he started working at the paper and, almost immediately, and I started selling the paper. The newspaper shop was located literally right across the street from the state capital, so I had the route of selling *The People's Voice* to government employees, and the legislature was in session every two years, to the legislature. And so every Friday afternoon I would race as fast as possible from school to the shop, pick up the papers, and try to get around all the government office buildings before they quit at five o'clock. Which, you know, it was a, that was a formative experience because *The People's Voice*, which was the name of the newspaper,

was a controversial paper. While it was farmer/laborer paper, a lot of the, my dad was taking on the right wing at the time, the American Legion, the gambling interests and so on, and people who worked for the state called it "The Pink Reporter". And I had bright red hair and they would make political references to the color of my hair and so on. And I learned how to be real mouthy. And it turned out that, you know, if I could enter into a banter with these people they'd buy the paper. And so I was, I really cut my teeth on shooting my mouth off as a, which is, you know, is something I never forgot how to do, selling that newspaper for three or four years.

**DN:** Do you remember any specific encounters?

**LB:** There was one guy named Jerry Ede who worked in the highway department drafting room, and he always gave me a bad time. And on a couple of occasions I put him down, to the great guffaws of people who were working with him because he was sort of obnoxious, and.

And the best encounter was of a totally different type. There was an elderly woman who worked in the state lands department who developed quite an affection for me. And one day in probably 1949 or '50, she gave me a box of campaign buttons which dated back to George [*sic* Thomas E.] Dewey, and there were some original [Robert M.] LaFollette, can't remember who his running mate was [LaFollette's running mate in 1924 was Burton Wheeler], and FDR, the [John Nance] Garner, bronze buttons. And, I mean, it was a treasure trove and it set me off on a lifelong collection of campaign buttons.

**DN:** You're still collecting them.

**LB:** I'm still collecting them.

**DN:** Now, I'm assuming that at home as well as in connection with the paper there were plenty of political discussions going on.

**LB:** Yes, and my folks not only allowed us, but encouraged us, I have two brothers, we're three years apart, encouraged us to sit in on those discussions. I was more interested than were my brothers, perhaps because they were sufficiently older as this thing was maturing that they had other things to do. But our house was sort of a hostel, if you would, for wandering liberals. In those days, you didn't have expense accounts and if you were a liberal from out of town you came to the Billings' house. We had a big house, sort of like yours, and it always had an extra bedroom. And my folks sort of had a basic rule, you know, show up and bring a bottle of whiskey and we'll give you a meal and you can spend the night. And, but part of the price of that was conversation, and the conversations would go well into the evening. Very often I was sent to bed before the conversation was over.

But when I, I remember there was a mayor of Billings named Willard Frazier who would come and he'd always bring his bottle of whiskey, and they'd always sit around and talk. And the interesting thing was the depth of these people, their intellectual depth, in a small place. There was a former congressman named Jerry O'Connell, served one term in 1940, that was nicknamed Red Jerry, for the obvious reasons. Jerry and my mother were involved in defending a capital murder case, and Jerry lived at our house a lot when he was doing that, and I was able to sit in

and listen to the evolution of the defense that he was (*unintelligible word*).

**DN:** Was your mother a lawyer?

**LB:** No, my mother was a crusading journalist who actually led the effort, my folks were vehemently anti-capital punishment. My dad was basically a Gandhi pacifist. And my mother carried this case all the way through until finally they got this guy off with a life sentence, but after four trials. But, it was, this went on for years and it was something I actually finally got my mother to write down in her later years, but it was quite an event, and an experience for a kid that just, you couldn't create.

**DN:** And you say Jerry [Joseph] O'Connell, through that period, stayed at your house.

**LB:** Stayed at our house either, let's see, if he was in Helena he spent the night there, if he was just in for the day it was, you know, the evening conversations and so on. And Jerry was an incredibly dynamic guy. He made his living getting rich people's kids out of the draft, and then he spent their money defending poor people. This was before legal aid or anything like that. In fact, I'm not even sure you were entitled to counsel in the 1950s in (*unintelligible phrase*).

**DN:** Now, during that period were you also encountering Lee Metcalf a lot?

**LB:** Oh yeah. Yeah, Metcalf, Lee and Donna were frequent visitors at our house. They were often over for dinner. Lee, when he came to Helena, almost always came to my dad's newspaper and would spend a couple hours. It was where I was exposed to a politician with a volatile personality. Lee, if Muskie had a short fuse, Lee had no fuse.

And he, I recall on one occasion when he was in my dad's office, he was running for reelection, this was probably '60. It may have been '60s. No, it must have been '60. He was running for the Senate and his AA was there, a guy by the name of (*name sounds like: England*), you remember (*sounds like: Britt or Brett*), and he was just tearing my dad and Britt and me apart. I was working for the Montana Farmer's Union at the time, and he described us as members of the congenital idiots club. And I said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, I'm not even a part of this, I'm a reporter." He says, "It doesn't make a goddamn bit of difference, you're another one of these congenital idiots," and it was one of those explosive moments.

And then one night, another night I remember he was at our house for dinner. And Lee was, had been very badly wounded in WWII, and unlike my father, Lee was a hawk. The issue, I think I raised the issue of universal military training and Lee's attachment to it. And I thought he was going to break our dining room table in half, he came on so strong in reaction to my position. And I remember afterwards that my father told me how proud he was at the fact that I didn't back down from Lee, and maybe that helped me to deal with Ed Muskie, too.

**DN:** Now, during that period did you also get to know, or did you see Mike Mansfield?

**LB:** Mansfield from time to time. Mansfield, I'm told that when Mansfield first ran for Congress in 1942 he actually, when he went to the part of, western Montana, he would stay at

my grandmother's house. Of course, again, in those days, I mean you remember this from your early campaigns, Democrats didn't stay in hotels, they stayed with friends. And I would see him at Jefferson-Jackson Day dinners and so on. Mansfield was, even into the '50s, by the '50s, he was an institution in Montana and he was a revered institution.

He and my father were, I found out just recently, he and my father were in the same graduating class at the University of Montana. He and my father had a falling out over the Natural Gas Act of 1954, Mansfield voted for it and my dad was vehemently opposed to it. And so for a long time they didn't communicate, until I found out also later in talking to Mansfield, that he had a great deal of admiration for my dad. He didn't like my mother. My mother was a columnist, and my mother had a much sharper, my dad used a hatchet, my mother used a needle, they always said, in the newspaper. But in any event, so I didn't really, you know I saw Mansfield and I had encountered him when I was an officer in the Young Democrats in Missoula. It was a, I saw him at a Truman event, but I didn't see him a lot until I came to Washington.

**DN:** Now you graduated from high school in Helena?

**LB:** In '55.

**DN:** And then off to -?

**LB:** I went to a little place called Reed College in Portland, Oregon for a year and found that I was very poorly equipped to go to a first class liberal arts college from a school that really didn't have much of a college preparatory. And I'd had two years of math and two years of language, and every one of my classmates had had four years of math and four years of language, and the, I mean I passed, but barely. And I also, it was expensive beyond our means. It was a great experience, I'm really glad I had it. It was also something I wasn't intellectually or academically prepared for. So then I went back to the University of Montana for four years earning a BA in history and then most of my MA, before I had to go to work for a living.

**DN:** Now had your brothers gone to college before you?

**LB:** My older brother didn't, my older brother, oldest brother went to Korea and after he came back got married and went to college off and on over the next fifteen or so years. Actually, he was the most academically proficient of the three of us. My brother Mike went to Hamilton College in New York for a year, a year ahead of me. Then he went to Carroll College in Helena, then he went to the state university, and then he went to the University of Montana, and then he went on to get a graduate degree in mathematics. But he went to five colleges in five years, but he did go.

My mother, you know, I don't think that, I think we may have been from my mother's side of the family, the first people to actually graduate from college. My father, because his mother was a relatively independent and for her time relatively well-fixed newspaper person in a small town in western Montana, was considerably better-fixed.

**DN:** Now she [Leon's paternal grandmother] was in newspaper work?



**LB:** Yeah, she had a, in 1924, the farm depression, a lot of people think the Depression started in '33, but in the agricultural area it started in '24, and a lot of banks went belly up, a lot of rural banks. And the bank she had her money in went belly up and they offered her pennies on the dollar for her investment. And she, being an independent, she was a difficult, tough, tough old bird, she went to the bank and demanded to see what their assets were and found that they had foreclosed on a print shop in a town some hundred miles away. She said, "I'll take that." She then hired a drayage firm, we'll use an old term, and they hauled this press and the type and all this stuff to her, this building, where she ran a service station, a general store and a post office.

**DN:** And this was on the Flathead Indian reservation?

**LB:** Yeah, the Flathead Indian, Camas, Montana. And she set up the print shop, taught herself how to set type, bought a flatbed press, eventually bought a linotype and learned how to use that, which was in itself a significant skill, and began publishing a newspaper which she published until she was seventy-nine years old. And, a weekly paper.

**DN:** Had your father worked on the paper?

**LB:** Oh yes, my father worked on the paper as a kid, he learned to set type as a kid. He worked on the paper on a couple of occasions as a young man but, each time he would work for awhile, after he got married, and then his mother and he would have a falling out and he'd have to go find a job someplace else. He and his mother had a stormy relationship.

**DN:** Did he have any siblings?

**LB:** No, no.

**DN:** Now, you went to the university and you say you went on to graduate school for awhile, and then you had to quit to earn a living.

**LB:** That's right. So I went to work for the *Montana Farmer's Union News*, which is a monthly newspaper, working for a brilliant, brilliant man, who was also an alcoholic, who taught me how to, taught me first lessons in how to write. My second lessons and third lessons came from you and that fellow we both worked for. But, and I spent about eight months doing that and, through a legislature. And then I got a job with a left wing farm organization in California as a field organizer and a contributing editor to their newspaper, which I did for about eighteen months.

**DN:** How did you make the connection with the California group?

**LB:** The person who was running the California group was, I mean this was, she, her husband who was deceased had been a railroader. And my grandfather had been a railroader. And she somehow called attention to the fact that she was looking for some young person to come in and take over this operation. And my grandfather informed me of it, and so I wrote her and she hired me. I mean, it was just an odd situation. But I was looking to get out of Montana and I needed,

you know, I needed to, I needed some, because of my political views, I was very, very political even then. I had no interest in going into business; I had no interest in going into government at the time. I wanted to stay active in something that was very political, and this provided an opportunity. So I went down there and I stayed for a year and a half, and then I met my first wife and we decided to get married and I realized that the job that I had there was not suitable for developing a family.

And so just quite by luck I was at a meeting in Portland, Oregon, and I was at a, up in a hotel room with a bunch of people, sitting around, having a drink after a day-long meeting. And I got in a, almost unintentionally, into a vigorous argument with a Farmer's Union representative by the name of Angus McDonald who was an irascible cuss. You may remember Angus. And Angus got very nasty, and this may be one of those places where learning how to be mouthy as a kid helped. But after the, after the end of our little confrontation a fellow named Alex Radin, who was the head of the American Public Power Association, pulled me aside and he said, "You ever thought about coming to Washington?" And I said, "No." He said, "Well, I'd like you to come back and work for me." And I said, "Doing what?" And he said, "Well, I'd like to see you, I need a legislative representative and, you know, you're just mouthy enough to get around on the Hill." And so I asked him some questions about it and then went back to California and talked to my fiancée. And we decided that we might as well just, when we get to Montana get married and then just keep going East, and so we came back here in '63.

**DN:** Tell us about Pat.

**LB:** Pat was a very, very interesting person. She was an independent, she was raised in a religiously split family, her mother was a devout Catholic, her father a taciturn Norwegian. She was one of, the oldest of three sisters. She was very bright, very independent. She spent her first, she got a degree in, a teaching degree from the University of Montana, she was a year older than I was.

**DN:** Had you known her in Montana?

**LB:** Not hardly. She was in a sorority. I was the antithesis of fraternity life. Actually, I was kicked out of Sigma Ki fraternity because I was, I opposed the ROTC program when I was a sophomore. But in any event, she always resented the fact that for her generation society typecast you if you were a professional either as a teacher or a nurse. And she wanted to be a journalist, she wanted to be a professional. But she had to make a living so she became a teacher. And she taught journalism, she taught English, and she traveled to Europe, and I think she raised a fair amount of hell in her early years, until she met me.

And then we came to Washington and she, we decided that she was going to, *we* decided, *she* decided that she was going to stay home and raise the kids. Which probably was the best decision we ever made, even though it was economically limiting. But then she really began to realize that the gap was growing between us, because I was out there growing in this job and doing new and interesting things and she was sort of stuck. And uh, so gradually she figured out a way to reenter.

She became involved in local politics and she became a star working in Democratic politics, working at first at the precinct level and then at the state legislative level, and eventually became a lobbyist for Group Health Association of America as a result of connections she made as a politician. But she was an exceptionally able politician. She ran for the legislature in 1990, was elected, led the ticket, and then died before she could take office in her own right. She had been appointed to the legislature a year before.

But Pat had all of the basic personality features I lacked. She was, well, she was strong-willed and intelligent, and she was somebody who was able to accommodate and compromise and get things done. And she, people liked her, and she didn't make a practice of making people angry. On the other hand, she had a very long memory, she could, if she disliked somebody it was for life. She was very much like my mother in that regard. I can never remember why I dislike somebody, but she would never forget why she disliked somebody. So she was a strong-willed woman.

**DN:** Now you and Pat arrived in Washington when?

**LB:** January 4th, 1963.

**DN:** And you were working for the American Public Power Association.

**LB:** Right, spent three years working with them.

**DN:** And what were your principle issues during those days?

**LB:** Well the principle, I guess there were, there are three that stand out. One was a piece of legislation called the Regional Preference Bill, which was a piece of legislation intended to give the Pacific Northwest control over the public power in their region so it didn't all bleed off to California. The second was the Dickey-Lincoln School project in Maine. And the third was sort of generally the authorization of, and appropriation for, various hydroelectric power projects around the country. And it was in the context of, actually in the context of the Regional Preference Bill that I met and got to know [Senator Henry] Scoop Jackson. And it was in the process of trying to get Dickey-Lincoln School authorized that I met Senator Muskie.

**DN:** So you were working on all three of the legislative issues. Were you the only lobbyist or were there others that (*unintelligible word*)?

**LB:** Well, I was the only full time lobbyist at APP at the time. And the legislative director tended to be more involved in the regulatory issues with what was then the Federal Power Commission, and there were, when I first started there were no other lobbyists. In fact when I left, they hired two people to replace me, which I always was a good sign of something. The (*break in taping*).

So yeah, there was no other legislative representative, and the, but we, one of the important aspects of what I was doing and what I was learning was, in that era in Washington, we practiced coalition politics. So on any given, the American Public Power Association was a liberal

organization, public power was a liberal issue. It was juxtaposed against the private electric utilities, that is the Electric Utility Institute, National Association of Electric Companies. And the National Electric Cooperative Association was a liberal organization headed by a guy name Clyde Ellis, if you recall. And we, we were very closely aligned with the Consumer's Federation of America and the AFL-CIO, and there weren't any environmental groups at the time.

But basically, you had a strong consumer lobby of which APPA was an important segment. So that everything we did, we did with coalitions, we knew we had no strength alone, to the point that from time to time we would get involved in things like Davis-Bacon, where there was no real interest on the part of APPA in Davis-Bacon, but in order to manifest your bona fides to your friends in labor. When there was a Davis-Bacon fight you went up and talked to your people about Davis-Bacon too, so that when you're doing Dickey-Lincoln, Dickey-Lincoln was a hydroelectric project which was going to bring in low cost power which was a consumer issue, it was going to create jobs, and so you had the co-ops, public power and the consumer people and labor all behind these kinds of projects. And so it was a, we had a strong coalition we worked for.

And yet on the other hand I was dragged into a lot of meetings, and what really paid off for me was I got to know a lot of the guys in Congress and in organized labor and these other groups because I was a body that was willing to go out and work with them. And I was philosophically comfortable with those folks. And of course another thing in those days was that even a twenty-five or twenty-six-year-old lobbyist like myself, if I wanted to see a member of Congress, I could see him. It didn't take, you know, it didn't take a campaign contribution. It took an interest in a relevant issue. And so, I mean, I dealt with people like (*name*), who by the way you know has just died.

**DN:** No, I didn't know that.

**LB:** He was eighty-nine, I mean, as I say, just very recently. But, you know, there were these direct opportunities for young people to become engaged. And I mean that's not as easy with senators, but relatively easy with congressmen.

**DN:** Did this stem from common interest in issues, or did it stem from the feeling that through you and through similar lobbyists there were votes to be gotten?

**LB:** I'm not sure I understand your question.

**DN:** Well, you said that this was not a case of having to make contributions in order to gain access. Was the access there because they were interested in the issues that you wanted to talk to them about, or was it more the fact that through you, through your organization and your allies, there were votes to be gotten -

**LB:** Back home?

**DN:** Back home.

**LB:** No, I think, and I don't, I think in certain cases there were members who were interested in the issues because the issues played well at home. But in my case, by and large when I went to see people it was to inform them on the issue, and a surprising number of members were accessible because they wanted to be informed on the issue. Some were accessible because they liked to pull legs off grasshoppers, they wanted to beat up on a lobbyist, you know.

But by and large it was, you know, I would go into a Republican congressman's office, I would have read as much as I could about his or her district, mostly his in those days, and I would start out a conversation about the principle economic interests in his district or something. Instantly, you would have their attention. Somebody knows something about me. And so you might spend thirty seconds talking about your project. But for the most part minds were already made up, you were either for or against public power. If you had (*word: useful?*) electric utility in your district, and I could get them to come to town, I would take them in to see the member and that often had influence. But it was, as a general rule, unless there was direct connection with their district it was, they were available to you to listen.

**DN:** And do you think it made a difference in your having access to the members that staffs were smaller?

**LB:** Absolutely, absolutely. The staffs were smaller, the issues were fewer, the likelihood of having the vote on the floor was greater. The, and the cost of campaigns was significantly less and members had to spend less time raising money, they knew where their money was going to come from. There were relatively few marginal districts.

**DN:** You mentioned the coalition building that you were engaged in during that period. The one group that intrigues me in that connection is the environmentalists, because you were pushing for hydroelectric projects and hydroelectric related programs. Were there clashes, accommodations, or simply not a major issue until you got to something like Dickey-Lincoln?

**LB:** There weren't any environmental groups. I mean, I don't, I do not recall a single voice of opposition to Dickey-Lincoln in the period in which we worked to get it authorized, which was '63 to '65, from any conservation group. There were no environmental groups. I mean, there were, you had, as I was to learn later, you had the old line conservation groups like the Wildlife Federation and Trout Unlimited and the Issac Walton League, but there were no groups like the Sierra Club or NRDC and so on. I mean, in essence, I mean Ed Muskie didn't create the Sierra Club but he gave it life, and he probably created NRDC and Environmental Defense and so on. So there were no environmental groups, and big dams were not a cause celebre. The old line conservation groups hardly lobbied the Congress at all, as far as I could tell. They were much more interested in the wild and city rivers legislation, parks and forest preservation and recreation areas and so on.

**DN:** When did you first meet Ed Muskie?

**LB:** Met Ed Muskie in March I think of 1963. I had been at APPA for two months and they had their annual meeting in Cleveland, and Muskie had been invited there to talk about Dickey-Lincoln School as a matter of fact, at least that's what he talked about. And I didn't know

anything or anybody, and so I was put in charge of meeting and greeting at the airport and picking people up and bringing them to the convention hotel and taking them back. So I met Muskie at the airport, took him to the hotel, got him in his room, got him down to make his speech, took him back to the airport and sat with him at the airport for half an hour or forty-five minutes waiting for an airplane, just sat and drank coffee and we just chatted. No, I only, I have a visual picture in my mind of sitting in what was then a pretty small unimpressive airport, at a round table with metal chairs, talking to Ed Muskie. But I have no idea of anything about the conversation except that it was probably about Dickey-Lincoln School. And I don't recall that he was diffident or difficult to talk to. It was pleasant.

**DN:** And this was just three months after you'd arrived in Washington.

**LB:** Right. And interestingly, you know, while, because I was so engaged in that issue, or was to become so engaged in that issue, but I didn't have a whole lot of dealings with him directly after that. I had a lot more with Bill Hathaway, because the problem was in the House, the problem wasn't in the Senate.

**DN:** And what were your encounters with Bill Hathaway like during that period?

**LB:** Actually, Bill Hathaway was a jewel to work with in the House. He realized that this was an important project in northern Maine. He, as far as I know, he devoted virtually a hundred percent of his time to lobbying members and poking at the coalition to make sure that it was active in telling us what to do. But he was a delight to work with, he really is. I mean, there's something, a person more different than this guy who ended up in the Senate you couldn't believe. Of course that was his first term, he was elected in '64, so he was a new congressman and, boy, he worked his butt off. And I believe that it was almost solely because of his effort that the project was authorized by the House.

**DN:** So during this period, you were continuing to work on various APPA programs and legislative interests. You'd encountered Ed Muskie, and you worked a lot with Congressman Hathaway from Maine's second district. When did the relationship with Ed Muskie or his office start to move, in '64 or '65?

**LB:** Well I think, you know, I've tried to think about that a lot. Now, I clearly met you probably in '64 or '65. I didn't have a lot of dealings with the Muskie office. I had more dealings, my recollection is I got involved in the Public Works and Economic Development Act which, if you recall, had [Joseph Manuel "Joe"] Montoya's name on it but basically Muskie drove it through. It was a follow on to the vetoed ARA that had been put through at the end of the Eisenhower administration, before Kennedy became president.

And the, I often remember the story that Muskie always told about the fact that he was probably the last senator who went to the Senate on a platform of economic development at home and abroad and supported foreign aid. But he cared deeply about that legislation, and it was a big item for the whole coalition. Labor, rural co-ops, APPA, there was a very broad group of progressive organizations that were supporting the Public Works and Economic Development Act. So I began working a lot with the likes of you and Bill Hildenbrand, and particularly with

Ron Linton and the committee staff on that legislation. And that was parallel to the Dickey-Lincoln authorization, but it was more of a Senate side thing than a House side thing.

**DN:** And did you at that time get involved at all in the air and water pollution legislation?

**LB:** No. I knew nothing about it, didn't even know what it was. I didn't learn anything about it until after I was offered the job.

**DN:** That's intriguing. Now, did Ron Linton ever tell you why he offered you the job? And let's tell folks what the job was.

**LB:** In March of 1966 I got a call from Ron Linton, who was the staff director to the Senate Environment Public Works Committee, and he asked me if I'd come and see him. And so I went up there, and the essence of the conversation was, Pat McNamara, who was then chairman of the committee, is dying. Jennings Randolph is going to become chairman of the committee, and we need somebody to protect Ed Muskie, and so I'd like you to come up here and join the staff. And, and staff is what was then the special subcommittee on air and water pollution. And I looked at him and I said, "Ron," I said, "I don't know," probably even used profanity, "I don't know anything about pollution." And he says, "I know that, but you know a lot about politics and you know a lot about the legislative process, and that's what you need to know." He said, "You can always learn the subject matter but you can't develop political instincts, and you can't, and you have to know the process to work around it."

And I thought about it and I said, "Well," I said, you know I said, "this is intriguing." And I'm not sure whether I asked this question as a, to put him off or because I was genuinely concerned. I think it was the latter. I said, "You know, it's a little bit silly. You're telling me that I should take this job from Pat McNamara, and he's going to die, and Jennings Randolph's going to be chairman, and I'm not going to have a job. So why would, you know, is this how this place works? And I said, "So," I said, "if I'm going to . . ." and I think I left it there. And I said, and I may not even have raised the issue at that point, but in any event I asked him how much it paid. And he said, "Sixteen-six [\$16,600]." Well at that time I was making nine thousand dollars in APPA, and -

*End of Side A, Tape One*

*Side B, Tape One*

**DN:** We are now on the second side of the November 29, 2001 interview with Leon Billings. Leon, you were talking about discussing an appointment to staff of the Public Works Committee with Ron Linton.

**LB:** So I went back to my office, and I thought about it. And I went in and I told Alex Radin that I'd been offered this job and that I really wanted to stay with APPA but I obviously, you know, the economics were such that it would be a very tough choice. And I, but I said, you know, "I'm willing to split the difference, you know. You put me up to thirteen thousand dollars a year I'll stay." And Alex said, "I can't do that." And he said, long story short, "I'll raise you to ten thousand."

So I went back and I called Ron and I said, "You know Ron, there's a problem with this job and that is that if McNamara hires me, Randolph can fire me. If I'm going to take the job, I need assurance from Randolph and Muskie that I've got the job." So Ron somehow got a letter signed by Randolph and Muskie, offering me this job. And if you recall, and this was unique, I was the only person ever hired on the committee by Muskie. Everybody else was hired by the full committee. But I had this unique relationship which turned out to be very important. Anyway, so I said, Ron got me the letter, and I said, "I'll take the job." I said, "When can I start?" And he said, well, I said, "I suppose I should give a couple weeks notice down here." And he said, "Well, let me send you some stuff."

So he sent me the hearings that Muskie had held between '63 and '66 on pollution. He said, "Read these." And, some of which I did but not all of which. And then he called me a couple days later, he said, by the way, I've made a mistake on your salary, you know, he said, it's seventeen-one, not sixteen-six. And so by around the 15th of March, 1966, I relocated from 919 18th Street to the Dirksen senate office building.

**DN:** Tell us about Ron Linton.

**LB:** Ron Linton was an impresario. He was clearly a political animal of significant intellectual talent and unlimited self-confidence. Except for the fact that he was so affable, you would have called him arrogant, but he never, his arrogance never penetrated his affability. He had a, he was intensely loyal to Ed Muskie. He believed that Ed Muskie ought to be president of the United States before Ed Muskie believed he ought to be president of the United States.

He tells the story about arranging to have a limousine pick Muskie up in 1964 in the Senate (I don't know if this is a true story or not), because he was trying to improve his public image because he was being discussed as a potential running mate for Lyndon Johnson. But he wanted, he wanted, he thought Ed Muskie was a star in the United States Senate. He knew that Muskie was a much more intellectually deep man than Pat McNamara, but he had all of what he thought were Pat McNamara's fundamental decencies. And he also, I think, had very serious reservations about Randolph and his association with various economic and pollution interests.

And he, but he ran a tight ship, he was a manager. Ron Linton was someone who would almost never have anything on his desk, perhaps except the piece of paper that you were going to talk about at that particular moment. He expected other people to do their job and get it done, and felt it was his job to, didn't feel it was his job to second guess. But on the other hand, he had a fairly strong sense of discipline and so you didn't work for him if you, and I worked with him a lot, you know. Didn't work for Ed Muskie, it took a long time before I worked with him. I worked for Ron and then I worked for you, long before I ever worked for Ed Muskie. And the unfortunate thing is that it was not too long after I joined the staff that Ron was required to retire as a result of McNamara's death. But I've often told people, you know, the people who have been somewhat antagonistic towards the legislative endeavors in which I was involved, I would introduce Ron as, quote, "the person who created Leon Billings," and he always took great pleasure in that. Still does.



**DN:** Now, you indicated that you worked for Ron, and then when Ron had to leave at Senator McNamara's death, you worked for Don Nicoll and later for Ed Muskie. But when was it that you first encountered Ed Muskie as the director of his subcommittee?

**LB:** I can't recall the, one tends to remember the stormy moments with Muskie more than the quiet moments. So, in 1966 when we were writing the, what started out as Lyndon Johnson's River Basin Clean Rivers Act, which later became the Clean Water Restoration Act, which was the first major effort to federally fund construction of waste treatment plants. And in that context the, my first encounter with Muskie was in negotiating the terms of the compromise with the chief counsel of the House Committee, Richard Sullivan. And I reached what I thought was a reasonable agreement and I took it back to Muskie, and he rejected it and gave me, in no uncertain terms, what he expected.

And I, I had I think one of the more difficult moments, because I had to go back to the House and tell them that Muskie wouldn't accept the compromise that I'd negotiated. And, I mean, I really thought it was genuinely unfair of Muskie to treat me that way. But the worst part was that the House staff for a long time thought that I was double crossing them, that I was saying one thing and then running back and . . . .

And over the years one of the fascinating things about Muskie was that people would assign to me a criticism that would more appropriately have been directed to him, but he was able to avoid it and let me, and I'm sure this is true with other staff people, take the heat. But in this case, for a long time, and in fact I think, I eventually turned that suspicion of the House people to my benefit when I, because I learned in that experience that you never reach a deal with the other body without first having cleared it with Muskie. So I always had a second bite at the apple, and they knew it. They knew that we could do all we wanted but I'd have to take it back, and I'd say, "Well, you know, this is fine with me but let me run it by the boss." So that was an unpleasant but highly educational experience.

The second thing is that in that same year the, we wanted to get an appropriation for Dickey-Lincoln School. And I came over, because even though I was doing the pollution stuff, you made it pretty clear to me that I was supposed to do all the rest of the stuff on the committee too; public works, highways, and so on. And so I came over and told you what I thought had to be done. And you said, "Well, don't tell me, tell him." This may have been even earlier than the clean water thing, because I recall it as my first real confrontation with him.

And I told him, and probably not in a manner that was necessarily designed to gain his confidence, I told him that he had to call Mike Mansfield and that he had to tell Mike Mansfield that you [Muskie] needed this appropriation for Dickey-Lincoln School. And I said, "There are four reasons you can give him." And I, he responded in a very provocative, antagonistic, overbearing, surly way. I mean, he just ripped every one of my arguments apart, and I sort of . . . If you recall, his desk sat directly across from the door to your office, and I was standing in front of his desk and I started to back out. And you put your hand on my back and said, "You're not going anywhere." And so I stood there and I was almost in tears. And I mean, I just, I hadn't had anything like this since Lee Metcalf as a kid.

And so, after he got all through he looked at me and he says, "Well, get him on the phone." And I said, "You mean Senator Mansfield?" He says, "Well who the hell, who do you think I'd mean?" Well, I'd never gotten anybody on the phone. So I went out, and I think it was Sandy Poulin who was sitting out at the outer desk. I said, "Can you try to get Senator Mansfield for Senator Muskie?" And she said, "Yes." So a couple minutes later Mike came on the phone and Muskie picked it up and he said, "Mike, I need you to get me eight hundred thousand dollars for Dickey-Lincoln School, and I've got three reasons for it." And he clipped off, I mean, the words were exactly the words, I mean he wasn't looking at a piece of paper, he was talking. Why he dropped the fourth one, I have no idea. Either he didn't think it was relevant, or he thought the other three were stronger, or whatever. But he did it, and he hung up the phone, and then he just sort of turned away. And I turned around and walked out. And I remember you sort of patting me on the shoulder as you sent me out of the room. But that was, that was the first real confrontational experience I had with him. But it was educational.

I mean it was, you know, I recall that, I can't remember what, Gayle Cory, after she married Don, they went off to New Hampshire for a year, and it may have been in '66 or '67.

**DN:** Somewhere in there, yeah.

**LB:** And I wrote a poem which was an ode to Gayle, which was very humorously critical of his, you know, about her doing his laundry and stuff like that. And I read the poem in that office, and you may even recall that moment. Most of the people in the office were shocked, Gayle was ecstatic, Jane loved it. And I walked over to him [Muskie] afterwards and he looked at me and he says, "You're a smart sonofabitch, aren't you?" And, I mean I think from then on the relationship, you know, while it was often stormy, it had gelled. There was something there that worked for the next fifteen years. That happened early.

**DN:** Yeah, and what was it do you think that he felt?

**LB:** For some reason, which I've never understood, he, let me take a story out of context. In 1976 I asked him to support me to be administrator of EPA. And he had talked to Secretary of Interior designate Andress and he had talked to the president about my being appointed, and when he heard that the president, without consulting him, had appointed Jimmy Rowe's son-in-law, Doug [Douglas M.] Costle, he was furious. And he wasn't furious so much I think because I hadn't gotten the job, but because he was embarrassed by the fact that he hadn't been consulted about it, and that he'd learned about it from a *New York Times* reporter.

So he called the president, and he called Cecil Andress. I was not in the room for the conversation with the president, though I'm told from Charlie Micoleau that the conversations were virtually identical. And he said to Andress, he listened for a long time, about why this thing had happened, and then he said, "Abrasive! You think Leon Billings is, Leon Billings is abrasive? Mr. Secretary, you don't even know Leon Billings. You have to know Leon Billings to know how abrasive he is!" And apparently he said exactly the same thing to the president, because some time later Carter confirmed it, he said that that, the conversation with Ed Muskie about his failure to appoint me was the second most unpleasant conversation he had in his first six months as president.

Anyway, I think that, I think that that, that to a degree me personality was insulation for his. And I think he also, you know, I think that, I mean I hope one of the things he liked was my creativity. And, you know, I didn't have any problems working with other people on the staff, so I didn't create problems for him that way. I created an occasional problem for him with some special interest but, but I don't know, he and I never talked about why I lasted as long as I did. Maybe it was just because of my pig-headedness.

**DN:** I want to take us back to your arrival on the scene in the Public Works Subcommittee, and two questions, and let's pursue the one dealing with personalities or committee staff first. You came to the committee as the first staff to that committee, other than Ron Linton and a couple of borrowed clerks. There had been no appointed staff for that subcommittee before, and the committee staff up to that time had essentially been Linton, Bill Hildenbrand, and Don Nicoll. And what was it like stepping into that situation, where these three fellows had run the show at the staff level up to that point?

**LB:** Well, I mean, in a way it was relatively easy because the three of you were sufficiently controlling that it was hard for me to make a mistake. And I, I mean, you had control, you exercised control, you held control, and I was essentially staffing you. And so it, I mean I used to get intensely frustrated. My wife developed a deep antagonism to you, because I would come home at night and I would complain bitterly about the restrictions that were placed on my ability to be creative by you and, less by Hildenbrand than by you. You particularly. I mean, Hildenbrand was an entirely different kettle of fish. And basically it became more Dick Royce after, and Royce was a problem of a different order, but -

**DN:** And Royce was the chief clerk of the committee.

**LB:** Yeah, after Linton. And who unfortunately was an alcoholic and frequently a drunk and, but brilliant, absolutely brilliant. But, you know, very difficult to deal with from time to time. The main, the, you frustrated the hell out of me because, you know, it reined me in constantly and it was, it became more difficult as time went on. Until really Muskie ran for vice president. And starting in the summer of '68, the reins got looser and they never really tightened up again because after the vice presidential race everybody was so preoccupied with the presidential.

And so I had, not only did I have my head but a couple of things happened that I think gave you or he more confidence in me. And one of them was the oil pollution legislation at the end of the, which we killed while he was on an airplane running for vice president in 1968. And I basically had to orchestrate that and take the responsibility for it and keep him out of the press about it, even though he was the one that was telling me what to do. And you were with him on the plane. So I think that, you know, it took about a year and a half for me to get my, or maybe two years, to get my wings. That was very frustrating the first years.

**DN:** Was, from your point of view then and also looking back on it, was this a matter of personality in terms of the control that was exerted, or was it a matter of different perspectives on staff roles and the interests of the senator, or was it something else?

**LB:** Well, in looking back, I know what it was now, but looking on it I thought it was that you were controlling access to the senator to protect your own control of the operation. I mean, I learned later as I moved up the ladder that he wanted that insulation, and the more, the further up the ladder I got, the more insulation I obtained and I, you know, I. It was very difficult because you never said, you know, 'the reason you're not getting in there isn't because I don't want you in there, it's because he doesn't want you in there'.

But the plain fact was that at the time, the explanation for my frustration was you. And Pat and I talked about it a lot, because it was very frustrating not to be able to get to Muskie. On rare, on occasion I did, but he was, it was, you have a very difficult time working on the Hill. The Hill is a great place if you have some influence over the people that you're working for. But if you feel like that's not the case, then it becomes very frustrating. And I'm, I appreciated it, I appreciated it by, by the presidential campaign I understood it, and by the time I became AA I fully appreciated it.

**DN:** Tell us about Bill Hildenbrand.

**LB:** Have you done an oral history with him yet? Oh, good. Well, Hildenbrand was a unique human being. He, he was much more of a Republican and much more of a traditional Republican than his boss was, J. Caleb Boggs from Delaware. He was, but he thoroughly, appeared to thoroughly believe in the concept of consensus politics. And I don't know whether it was just him, or he was reflecting his boss, or both, I don't know that you can ever really separate those things after a while. He was an irascible cuss. He taught me a lot about who controls the process. He taught me, for example, that in the Senate the minority controls, whether it's a committee hearing or what goes on on the floor. He was a very smart operative from the institution.

Bill and I had coffee together every morning, because I got in early and he got in early, and we sat at a table right next to George Aiken and Mike Mansfield as a matter of fact. And we, so we got to know each other extraordinarily well.

And I have no specific stories about Bill that, but that, you know, we had, the way the process worked in those days. As you well know because you organized it was, you worked together with your minority, and Muskie wanted to do that, Muskie firmly believed that you, that he could take, he was prepared to take as long as necessary to eliminate opposition to you, or to isolate it. And Hildenbrand understood that, Boggs understood that, Muskie and Boggs wanted to have a consensus, and Boggs didn't want to be in a situation where one of his fringe Republicans was out there shooting at him, and Muskie knew that. And also Muskie and Bill and you knew that while Caleb Boggs was an extraordinarily nice man, he wasn't very deep, and he wasn't very intellectual. He had a good sense for things. And Bill protected him extraordinarily well and was a jewel to work with, even when he was a prick, which he could be. Is that a word that we don't use in oral history?

**DN:** Oh yes. Now, you came into the committee, and it had been working since '63. And you had to, and you said earlier that you really didn't know anything about the pollution legislation up to that point so you had the advantage of coming in as an outsider, as it were, on the

substantive issues, and beginning to learn about them. What was your impression of what had been done, and why, up to that point?

**LB:** Well, let me, let's step back. Ron knew, that in addition to everything else, that I was a very partisan Democrat. I saw pollution legislation almost instantaneously as a area in which you could differentiate between the public interest and private interest. And to a degree philosophically, it occurred to me that the more you could extract from business to control pollution, the more you were forcing them to exercise at some level of social responsibility.

So for me the whole, my whole first vision was that pollution was a subset of the, essentially the class struggle between the haves and the have-nots, between economic forces and social forces. And I had no pre-, because I didn't know anything, but I had no preconceptions about what you'd done or why you'd done it, though I quickly learned the, you know, because of the problems with things like nondegradation and the warfare between then chamber of commerce and Muskie, and their pet dog, Jim Watt, that there really were the elements of Republican-Democrat, progressive-conservative struggle that I was interested in.

So I didn't really, I didn't pass judgment on the content. My assumption was that the content was dictated by Muskie's view that a), you got as much as you could, and b), that the level of government most able to do the job should have the responsibility for doing it.

And I, you know, when I first came, this is a story I've never told anyone. When I first came up there, there was a guy named Alan [R.] Novak who worked for Kennedy. Novak was a very slick operator, and I had drafted this bill, it was a TVA type approach to water pollution. And Novak and I were talking and he convinced me to come up to Massachusetts, and I came up to Merrimack and made a speech and so on. And I was in the process of giving that draft bill to Kennedy, when something happened. And I can't recall what it was, but it indicated that in fact not only did I need to give this to Muskie, it was entirely inappropriate for me to be doing what I was doing, and I was letting my, sort of my knee-jerk . . . Muskie was such an enigma because he wasn't a, did not appear to be an active player, his style was so low key. And Kennedy was out there being, you know, "rah-rah-rah!". And I almost got, I almost got caught, but fortunately, and literally, literally, I had promised that bill to Teddy's people and I pulled it back and gave it to Muskie and Muskie introduced it. But it, and I, as I say, I don't remember what the event was that caused me to realize that I was looking for somebody who was more, had more timbre than that. But it was (*unintelligible phrase*).

**DN:** I'm intrigued with this because of your earlier comments about your relationship with me and a feeling of control. And I've neglected to ask you how that control was exerted, what it was that frustrated you the most in that working relationship?

**LB:** It was access, you know. One year, and as vigorous as I was, and I'm sure you saw manifestations of that vigor frequently, I was frustrated by the fact that here I was working on the Hill for a United States Senator and never saw him. And my assumption was that he would want to see me, but for you. And that, the, your habit of editing stuff that I sent over was frustrating from time to time, but it was more a function of the access issue than it was the content, because usually the content was improved. I mean, you know, we gradually over the

years developed some disagreements on legislative structure, but by then we had such a good working relationship it wasn't, it was neither threatening or antagonizing. And besides that, you had too much to do elsewhere. Or what. But in any event, no that, you know, it, I think, I find it hard to understand how now with so many staff people up there, that staff people aren't more frustrated. And maybe one of the reasons the turnover is so high is because the access is so limited. For someone to stay as long as I did or as long as you did, that's very rare today.

**DN:** You, in 1966 you were in the midst, jumped into the midst of, as I recall, both the Clean Water Restoration Act and the Air Pollution Act because there was a Clean Air Act that year -

**LB:** No.

**DN:** Not Clean Air Act, but -

**LB:** No, the issue in '66 was the, Johnson's Clean Rivers Program, which was a part of his message, and the Oil Pollution Act. And we, in 1966 we, what did we do, 1966 we passed the Clean Waters Bill and we amended the Oil Pollution Act of 1924, and we got snookered by Jim Wright who understood admiralty law and oil pollution law, and we didn't. And the, essentially the Oil Pollution Act of 1924, which was a modestly adequate statute was gutted, and we didn't find out about it until later. It came up because, I believe the Tory Canyon was in 1966 [*sic* March, 1967], the big oil spill off France, and we spent the next two years, next four years trying to correct that, ultimately correcting it in the 1970 Water Quality Improvement Act. But the, through all of '66 it was clean water, and then in '67 it was the Air Quality Act which was the great expansion of the concept that you guys developed in 1963 when you wrote the air quality criteria provisions and so on.

**DN:** And can you tell us something about the negotiations that led to revising the legislation that the administration had introduced on rivers in 1966?

**LB:** I can't tell you a lot, but if I remember correctly the administration bill was a pilot bill, and it had a series of demon-, river basin clean up demonstration projects, one of which was the Potomac River. And the, neither committee could support the idea that they were going to target federal funds to a limited number of river basins, and so the decision was made I believe in the Senate that the, there would be a much broader scope approach. And the '66 act was largely an initiative to fund municipal waste treatment facilities. It didn't have much of a regulatory structure. I believe that, yeah, it had this oil pollution section but it didn't have any of the more fundamental regulatory structures.

So the, I guess the fundamental difference was that the president wanted a limited program targeting certain river basins, and the, Muskie said, "Well, you know, Lyndon will be happy with his title." So we passed the Clean Rivers Restoration Act as opposed to the Clean Rivers Bill. And then the House passed theirs, I think, as the amendments to the Federal Water Pollution Control Act, and they refused to give Lyndon his title. And it was pure petulance that they insisted on calling it the Clean Waters Restoration Act as opposed to Clean Rivers Restoration. But they wanted to, and I don't understand why, because the House, you know, they

-

**DN:** Was this the Public Works Committee?

**LB:** House Public Works Committee. It was Jim Wright and Bob Jones and, I'm trying to remember, the chairman was either George Fallon or, what's his name, Clifford from Tennessee, I'm not sure which. But anyway, the institution of that committee was run by Richard Sullivan. And who it was that said we're not giving Lyndon his title, I don't know, but that was the, a major part of the debate. And we ultimately conceded on the title because we got what we wanted on the construction grants.

**DN:** Who did you deal with in the administration?

**LB:** Well, the, Stew Udall, Secretary of Interior. And in May of 1966, shortly after I got on board, the Clean Water Improvement Program was moved from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to the Department of the Interior because, quote, "When Lyndon Johnson thinks of water he thinks of Udall", unquote. The, Leo Weinberger, who was the assistant secretary, and Jim Quigley who was the commissioner of water pollution, who by the way I saw the other day at the Mansfield funeral. We dealt with Quigley on a day-to-day basis, and Weinberger wanted to deal with us on a day-to-day basis but he really never got the picture. But Quigley really did understand the political process. And Muskie dealt with Udall on a more direct basis because Udall used to try to lobby Muskie directly, which almost never succeeded. I'm trying to remember who at the White House was, it will come to me. But it was mostly Interior people.

**DN:** Did Joe Califano get involved at all?

**LB:** No, Califano was not involved. There was somebody and I, it's certainly not important or else I'd remember it.

**DN:** And was the administration actively engaged through Jim Quigley?

**LB:** Yeah, Quigley was interesting, because remember Quigley was also involved in the 1965 Clean Air Act when he was still at HEW, and he was the one that ultimately had to flip-flop and give Muskie what he wanted on automobile emission standards. But, and Quigley, because he was a former congressman, spent a lot of time on the Hill and was pretty, pretty actively involved. I mean, as I said, I don't think Weinberger ever knew what was going on politically. He may have been a good program person, but he wasn't particularly (*Unintelligible phrase*).

And then of course, around that time Quigley left and Joe Moore came in as the head of the water pollution program, and if you recall that created some problems with the senator because Moore was from Texas and Muskie wasn't exactly sure what his credentials were, so he refused to meet with him for quite some time. And when he did meet with him, he, somebody ought to get Joe Moore on this, he had an extraordinarily unpleasant meeting. And it went, and I think it was more because, the fact that there had been no consultation with Muskie on his appointment. I mean, you were there, you were in the meeting, as was I.

**DN:** How did that Moore relationship evolve, both with the senator and with the committee (*unintelligible phrase*)?

**LB:** It became quite good. It lasted for quite a while, because after Moore came back as the executive director of the Federal Water Quality Commission, whatever that thing was. But no, Moore moved very quickly to reassure Muskie that he wasn't some Texas reactionary. And also, you know, I don't think Muskie had an appreciation for it, and I certainly didn't have an appreciation for, the fact that water pollution was a significantly greater issue in Florida, I mean in Texas, than we perceived. We saw Texas sort of as a conservative, anti-environment, oil company controlled organization. But because of the water shortages in the state, there was significantly greater interest in clean water regulation there than we had understood. And I think Moore did a good job of moving our understanding of his concern. And he actually, I think he also grew in the job. And they got to the point of having a very good relationship.

**DN:** Was the water pollution issue in Texas primarily a sewage waste, or was it industrial waste?

**LB:** It was primarily sewage. In 1966, remember it wasn't really until '72 that we began to really address the industrial waste problem. The, the, Muskie's view I believe, prior to the post-vice presidential run was that the best way to effectuate industrial waste cleanup was to create the capacity for public agencies to provide joint treatment, because that would take the economic burden off these older plants and so on while at the same time stimulating municipal cleanup. And it was an incredibly good idea that had essentially one flaw, and that is that there was an incompatibility between industrial waste and municipal waste. But to the extent they were compatible, I mean, and Muskie saw it in the context of pulp and paper mills -

*End of Side B, Tape One*

*Side A, Tape Two*

**DN:** This is the second tape for the interview with Leon Billings on November 29, (19--, not 19--) 2001. Leon, you were just talking about the question of industrial and municipal waste.

**LB:** Right, and Muskie, I think, firmly believed that most of the industrial waste could be treated by municipal treatment projects. And this might be an appropriate time for a story. Many people have asked me when Muskie developed his interest in what they now call environment pollution control. And I have said that to the best of my knowledge, when he was governor and he was trying to attract industry to the state of Maine, and he learned that the rivers of Maine were so polluted that there was no assimilative capacity for new plants to use if they came here. Now whether or not that's true, he clearly had a more significant interest in water pollution than he did in air pollution, for two reasons: one, because water pollution was much more real in Maine in those days; and two, because water pollution was an issue which the federal government had begun to address in the forties and the fifties. But he saw a nexus between clean water and economic development long before, as far as I can tell, anybody else appreciated that nexus.

And whether it started as a legislator or just as a citizen or as a fisherman or as governor, and this



Saco situation that he used to describe, it propelled him into an interest. And, I mean I, to this day have no idea how he got interested in air pollution, though I do know that in the years before I came there he held these incredible field hearings around the country on both air and water pollution which developed the first record, which, and I assume from that is where he got his abiding interest.

**DN:** The, you spoke of the flaw of the incompatibility of much of the industrial waste with municipal waste, and that, did that come into play starting in the '66 rivers legislation, or did it (*unintelligible word*) later?

**LB:** No, it wasn't appreciated until we, a lot of things happened, you know. Pollution law was sort of like a snowball rolling downhill, it was picking up mass faster than I think we had any appreciation for. It is interesting to a degree that we got out ahead of it as far as we did, to which I attribute to Muskie's singular capacity to utilize a crisis to achieve a political objective. But, no, we didn't, we did so much from ignorance. Muskie's view was, 'it's better to make a mistake by doing too much when you don't know anything than by doing too little when you don't know anything'.

And so, you know, we started out, in '66 we were concerned about as much the economic development aspects of clean water as we were about the clean water aspects of clean water. We knew we'd get both, but the west belt economies needed money to treat their water. And Nelson Rockefeller was one of Muskie's primary allies as governor of New York, and then Spiro Agnew who was, I think in '66 was running for governor of Maryland, he was the county executive of Baltimore county, same kind of obsolete west belt communities. There was a strong, strong economic side to this.

And we weren't to learn until later, it was really with the '72 act that we realized that if this joint project was going to work you needed two elements: one was you needed to have tough pretreatment standards, which are only now thirty years later coming into play, to get the incompatible waste out of the system; and two, you needed to substitute user fees for (*unintelligible word*) taxes as the means for supporting these waste treatment facilities, or you would be building one generation of facilities without any future capacity to expand and grow, and be right back to the federal government for financial support.

**DN:** I'm going to suggest that we stop here, Leon, and pick up the story later because we'll be taking on a whole series of new pieces of legislation. And I'd like to, one, for me to have a chance to review and come back at it, and also have you have more time to think about the late sixties in particular, as we get into working up to the 1970s.

**LB:** Yeah, we really need to spend some time talking about my view of the context of the '68 campaign, and my conversations with Muskie about that, because there's a very important conversation that we need to get on the record about the '68 campaign.

**DN:** Well let's do that in a piece.

*End of Interview*