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Interview with Leon Billings by Henry Sirgo

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Billings, Leon

Interviewer

Sirgo, Henry

Date

July 9, 1998

Place

Washington, DC

ID Number

MOH 105

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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: the Water Quality Act of 1965; Earth Day 1970; Rockefeller and Muskie; George Mitchell; environmental legislation; and the National Water Quality Commission.

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Henry Sirgo: Thank you for agreeing to the interview. I'm preparing a paper for a presentation to the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in Boston about two months from now. And you wrote a paper called the "Senator Edmund S. Muskie Environmental Policy Formulation and Incubation in the U.S. Senate" and I'm working on it as part of a longer term book project entitled The Brothers Udall: Institutionalizing Environmentalism and I interviewed, conducted an interview with Stuart Udall about, actually just about a year ago, last July 22nd in Sante Fe, New Mexico. And he, both, or Udall said that Muskie is the most important public office holder in terms of promoting environmentalism and,

one might say, (*unintelligible word*) institutionalizing environmentalism (*unintelligible word*).

LB: How is Stuart?

HS: He's great.

LB: Very damn near eighty.

HS: He was born, he's got exactly the same birthday as I do, January 31st. He's a few years ahead of me, I'm 1951, he was 1921 and, but, so he's -

LB: Seventy-eight.

HS: Yeah, and he's strong and -

LB: That's good, I haven't seen him, I last saw him I think with, something with Robert Redford some years ago. He and I have, no, actually I saw him at a, at an event for his brother. But I've known him for almost forty years.

HS: Wow. (*Unintelligible phrase*) how's his son working in his race?

LB: He's going to win.

HS: He's got, great.

LB: Well, see, there are two Udalls running and both should win. And Tom is almost certain to win in New Mexico. Mark may have a tougher race. If Mark survives the primary, he should win the general.

HS: And so he, anyway, he encouraged me. I also had a colleague who, from, a political science colleague and he told me that really I should look at the Muskie Archives papers. Now, when did you meet Edmund S. Muskie?

LB: In '63.

HS: And what was your position?

LB: I was a staff person, I was leg--, a lobbyist for the American Public Power Association [*see Larry Hobart interview: MOH# 233*] and Muskie was a speaker at our annual meeting in Cleveland, and I was assigned the responsibility of picking him up at the airport and delivering him to the conference and returning him to the airport. Three years later I went to work for him.

HS: Why did Senator Muskie decide to champion the environmental movement?

LB: I'm not sure he knew that that's what he was doing at the time. He, as governor, he was confronted with the fact that pollution of the Maine's rivers was inhibiting economic

development and, economic, the Maine economy was in shambles as a result of the southern flight of the textile industry and he was trying to attract new business. And potential companies would come in and they'd see there was no similar (??) capacity in Maine's rivers and say, "Sorry, we don't have anyplace to dump our wastes." And so his initial interest was in water pollution. And it was, and you know, Muskie, I made a speech about Muskie which I'd be happy to give you a copy of, recently, the first Edmund S. Muskie environmental lecture at the Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service. And Muskie was a conservationist and a hunter and a fisherman, so he had that aspect. But that was very different than his environmental, and he always understood I think better than most the difference between environmental protection and conservation. Conservation being something people practice, and environmental protection is something you made people do.

HS: So he took a great deal of initiative in that particular area, and it was something that you've actually (*unintelligible word*). And you, Stuart Udall, he used the term, described Muskie in the area of clean air and water policy that, quote, "The real initiator was Senator Muskie." What was his relationship with Stuart Udall, secretary of the interior, and how helpful was the fact that he served eight years, to the formulation of environmental policy?

LB: How helpful was, the fact that Udall served eight years?

HS: Yeah.

LB: I'm not sure that his time in office had anything to do with it. The, I don't know how to answer that question. There were a lot of things going on more prominently in conservation policy during the period of Stu's tenure than there were in the creation of environmental policy. In fact, most of the major environmental policy initiatives occurred in the Nixon administration at the initiative of the Congress and largely over the objection of the Nixon administration. During the period when Stu was secretary, there were, my recollection is that the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation was created, the Land and Water Conservation Fund was passed. Wild and scenic rivers legislation was passed, a number of wildlife refuge measures were passed. A lot of this stuff initiated by Scoop Jackson, Lee [Warren] Metcalf and others, but those were all conservation measures.

The only real involvement Stu had with the environmental policy was when in 1966 Johnson, by a reorganization act, transferred the water pollution program from the Public Health Service to the Interior Department and it was only in the Interior Department for four years. Stuart was helpful in that context because one of the big fights that was going on in the early sixties was what we called non-degradation policy and that was the, Muskie wanted, the Clean Water Act of '65, '63 -

HS: There's something called the Water Quality Act of 1965.

LB: Yes, '65, was challenged by the Chamber of Commerce because they said that the non-degradation policy was unlawful. And I believe that may have gone to the Supreme Court. And in any event we prevailed on it, with the support of Udall, and established that under federal law you couldn't allow rivers to become dirtier. It was a very important environmental initiative.

And then in '66 we did the first major funding legislation, the first major construction grant program and that sort of basically changed the nature of the water pollution initiative.

But there were, there was a fair amount of regulatory policy that occurred in '66, '67, '68 period. Joe Moore, who is still living in Texas, I think he's, he had been on the faculty of the University of Texas. I don't know whether he still is or not, but he was the water pollution commissioner, second water pollution commissioner after Jim Quigley. Quigley's still alive I think, he would, Quigley would be well into his eighties at this point, but those are the people that we worked with. Stu had, the reason why, one of the interesting stories is the reason that water pollution was transferred from the Public Health Service to Interior Department was because Stuart wanted the program and he convinced Lyndon Johnson that he should have the program. And it was always said, because when Lyndon Johnson thinks of water he thinks of the Department of the Interior, he doesn't think of the Public Health Service, but anyway.

HS: (*Unintelligible phrase*) states now, at least in recent decades, like I believe in Louisiana it was originally under I think public health and now it's, they've got the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality. How did Senator Muskie meet the objections of the Nixon administration? Or was it primarily that he was seen as the most likely opponent of Nixon or what do you think?

LB: Well, the, we really basically ignored the Nixon administration. Muskie, the key clean water legislation was the '72 act which Nixon vetoed and we overrode the veto. You know, virtually every major piece of clean water legislation has been vetoed. I think the, Nixon vetoed, Reagan vetoed, Bush vetoed.

HS: In 1960 Eisenhower vetoed water pollution legislation.

LB: That's right, that was the first one. So there's a history of Republican presidents vetoing Democratic clean water initiatives. Anyway, so basically, I mean, Muskie had a theory of federalism which was that we ought to give the states the maximum responsibility and the opportunity to do the job, but that their failure to perform should be backed up by a fairly strong federal "gorilla in the closet", if you would. There's ample federal financial resources and federal minimum standards of environmental protection which would make sure that a) public health and environment were fully protected, and b) it wasn't easy for states to sell their environment to potential economic activity. Muskie was very, very sensitive to the fact that a lot of states were pollution havens and they were using lax environmental protection to attract industry from other states, and he was intent on eliminating that opportunity.

HS: I remember a conversation with this fellow from Massachusetts who worked in the McNeese Library and he was saying that he came across some documents that, or maybe promotional materials that indicated like there were, I think the state of Louisiana was making efforts to attract industry by saying, "Well you don't have to worry about onerous regulation," or something to that effect.

LB: Yeah, and I mean they're more sophisticated now, they still do it, particularly in the south where there is less sensitivity to this issue, though that's changing too.

HS: How did Senator Muskie prepare for Earth Day in 1970? He got quite a response (*unintelligible phrase*).

LB: Well in 1970 he had a, in the first place by 1970 Muskie had been in the senate for twelve years. He was running for reelection, he'd just come off the vice presidential, highly successful vice presidential run even though he didn't win. He really, he was really popular in Maine so his political base was covered. He had a fairly ample staff on the three subcommittees on which he served: environment, intergovernmental relations, particularly IGR. And basically, you know, we, we came up with a plan that would start him out at Acadia National Park at sunrise on Earth Day and end him up on the mall at nine o'clock at night. And we got a, I'm not sure, I know he did the sunrise service and that was advanced by a guy named David Johnson who was here in town, he was working at that time for IGR. And then he went someplace else, and then he went to Philadelphia and then he came here and he made one of the last major speeches on, down at what was then sort of the band box by the Washington monument about nine o'clock at night.

How did he prepare for it? I mean, Muskie didn't have to do a lot of preparation because unlike a lot of the other johnny-come-latelys to the environmental movement, by 1970 Muskie had pretty much defined the issues in the way that he was comfortable with so it wasn't, it was just a matter of trying to create some talking points and speeches. I suspect you found some of those in the library if you were looking into his speech files.

HS: When the, during the Ford administration there was the energy crisis. I remember, or I don't remember, I mean, I just, I read during my research, about the president wanted to have a moratorium on emission standards. And you do have a, you were probably (*unintelligible phrase*) for environmental matters (*unintelligible word*) than say in 1970. How did he respond to that and deal with that, to keep environmental (*unintelligible phrase*)?

LB: Well the, he was, he basically just said "no". The, number one, he informed the White House and the, and [James R.] Jim Schlesinger who I believe was, I don't whether the Department of Energy had been created, whatever Schlesinger was, he was energy czar, that they were factually incorrect, that the energy crisis was a short term phenomena and postponing auto emission standards, for example, to accommodate the crisis would have absolutely no impact on the energy supply situation, and requiring this sort of wholesale cancellation of emission controls on power plants was equally stupid.

And fortunately, the administration had a, they'd made a serious factual mistake with respect to coal conversion. What they wanted to do was relax emission standards so all these plants that were burning oil and natural gas could convert to coal and they had these stupendous numbers of the savings that would accrue if they did that. Well, it turns out that about eighty or ninety percent of the plants that they identified to create these humongous numbers were not capable of converting to coal. They were plants that were built to burn gas and oil only, they had never been designed to burn coal, there was no way you could burn coal in them. And that pretty much took care of that problem.

HS: How does his work with Vice President Nelson Rockefeller and U.S. Representative Jim

Wright on the National Water Quality Commission, who's the, I believe the vice chairman of that?

LB: How does what work?

HS: How did, well, was his, did he have a good working relationship with Rockefeller and with -

LB: Absolutely not. It was a contentious process from day one to day end. Rockefeller saw the commission as a, it really turned out to be Rockefeller and Bob Jones, by the way, of Alabama. Wright was not the chairman but I think he moved, Jones became chairman of the committee and Wright may have moved to speaker by then. But in any event, Rockefeller saw the commission as a way of vindicating his allegations against the '72 Clean Water Act, the so-called three trillion dollar mistake, and Muskie was intent on not letting him do it. And we forced an ultimate resolution which was not terribly to Rockefeller's liking, and then we ignored the commission recommendations when we rewrote the act.

HS: Why had Rockefeller been so critical over the 1972 act?

LB: I don't know, you could go back and read his testimony in the house vote in about December of '71. I think that Rockefeller bought into the Republican line on The 1972 act was a problem because it had a very rigorous regulatory structure for industry and for communities, and the Chamber of Commerce and AM position was that they didn't want that, so they tried to discredit the act as being a regulatory nightmare and Rockefeller bought into it. I suspect Rockefeller was still thinking about being president.

HS: A couple years earlier, I believe he was present at the Stockholm Conference in 1972?

LB: No, Muskie did not attend the Stockholm Conference.

HS: Oh, he did not (*unintelligible word*).

LB: I do not believe, he may have, I don't believe he did. No, '72, I don't think so because he was running for president.

HS: Oh, that's right.

LB: Karl Braithwaite who was, later became staff director of the subcommittee after me, attended the Stockholm Conference, but Muskie didn't.

HS: Now did, now he was the author of the Clean Air Act of 1963 and that was -

LB: Sixty three, '67, '70, and '77.

HS: Did, when George Mitchell was working with him did he have any of those -?

LB: No, no, George had nothing to do with any aspect of environmental protection. He was Muskie's executive assistant for a fairly brief time. The person who did all the work on environment for Muskie prior to my coming on board was Don Nicoll who was his administrative assistant. Don is alive and well in Portland, Maine, and Don did all the environment stuff.

HS: Yeah, I interviewed him two days ago. In fact just about (*unintelligible phrase*) and I had a fine interview with him. They had a, now he had a very good transition for Muskie and was quite successful because usually people get appointed to the senate, (*unintelligible phrase*) -

LB: Now you're talking about George?

HS: Yeah, and he had a, what accounted for his transition from Muskie being so smooth. And in fact I think he had some recognition in environmental matters, when he served in the senate anyway.

LB: Oh yes, George became very, George basically took Muskie's position on the subcommittee and very quickly took Muskie's role as the leadership on environmental issues in the senate. He, the reason that he was successful, as successful as he was in the senate, (of course, I was running the Democratic senatorial campaign committee at the time) was because the economy went in the toilet and all of a sudden the flush was off the rose of the Reagan administration and George took advantage of that fact in a very, George was a tremendous campaigner, he raised sufficient money and he worked his tail off and he got the breaks of the economy going down.

HS: Now, altogether, how long were you responsible for environmental policy with -

LB: Twelve years.

HS: Twelve years from what -

LB: Sixty-six to '78.

HS: Sixty-six to '78.

LB: So basically, almost everything but Superfund was done on my watch. Superfund culminated after we had left the senate, Muskie and I, he as secretary of state and me to be his chief of staff there. And though we had created the structures on which Superfund was based, it was actually enacted after we were gone.

HS: Now for your tenure, was there any, particularly dealing with environmental policy, was there any change in party regional or ideological backing for environmental policy?

LB: Yeah, the, it basically broke down into two periods, or maybe three periods. There was a period from '63 through '69 when environmental policy was in its infancy and adolescence, where they took some very slow halting steps towards federalizing environmental policy. And

then from '70 through '72, where Muskie took advantage of certainly Earth Day environmental activist period to dramatically change the structure and direction of federal law. And then the period from '73 through '77, where we basically organized to keep the congress from rolling back that which we'd done in that middle period.

The initial period, the Democrats had such an enormous overwhelming majority in congress that it was relatively easy, but at the same time the laws were pretty rudimentary and not terribly controversial.

In the middle period the majorities were not as great, but Muskie had done such a tremendous job of making, of molding a bipartisan consensus in dealing with a very conservative committee that he was still able to take this legislation through the senate unanimously.

Then in the latter period the senate became much more conservative, particularly with the election of '74 so that the, Muskie no longer had the kind of working majority that he'd had in the previous two periods that I outlined. And there he had to be much, much more of a legislative tactician in order to maintain the ground that we'd gained in '70 through '72. Both the '77 Clean Water Act amendments and '77 Clean Air Act amendments were characterized as mid-course corrections. There wasn't very much mid-course correction, but there was enough to take the pressure off from the more conservative block that by that time controlled the legislature.

HS: Who were some of the specific members of the conservative block that, on that particular matter?

LB: You know, I mean in 1977 you had people like Malcolm Wallop of Utah who replaced Gale [William] McGee, you had Orrin Hatch who replaced Ted Moss, you had, I think that may have been the year that Don Re-, no, yeah, that may have been the year that [Donald Wayne] Don Riegle replaced Phil Hart, Sam Nunn came to the senate that year. The class of '58 lost a fair number of their membership in '76 so that in '74 that percent, Nunn came in '74, but you began to have a shift in political ideology. I can't remember, I mean that's twenty-five years ago, I can hardly remember what happened yesterday.

HS: That was wonderful and I think that's most, well (*unintelligible phrase*), in terms of, did you find that his foreign policy involvement complemented his environmental policy interests?

LB: Well, they did to a degree. I mean he, you know, Muskie ran for the senate in '58 on a platform of foreign aid, foreign and domestic economic development aid, aid at home and aid abroad. He never saw a conflict between environmental protection and economic development. He thought that they were, it was essential that they operate together. But when he was secretary of state, the environmental issues obviously were pretty much on the back burner until waning days when he was responsible for getting the global 2000 report out, which is really the antecedent to all of the international environmental initiatives that the United States is now involved in. So they sort of came back together then, but we, as secretary of state we were so preoccupied with the Iranian hostage situation, the Polish situation, the Afghanistan situation that, and he, you know, just, we were not there that long to really start setting off on any

initiatives of our own.

HS: Now Madeleine Albright was with him from, I know it's at least in 1977 she was because I came across some

LB: Yeah, Madeleine came to work for us in '75 and then left, let's see what did she. She came to work with us actually the first time in '71 on the presidential campaign as a volunteer in the fund raising department. Then she came to work on the staff, came to work as a full time fund raiser in '75 because we thought we were going to have to run against Bill Cohen. And when Cohen pulled out, we hired Madeleine as a legislative assistant and she was legislative assistant up until early '78 when the legislative director of the chief council left and she took that job and so she worked for me for a couple months, and then she went down to be an assistant to Brzezinski.

HS: In fact the, yeah, the one memo, I did about, oh, two and a half weeks of research operating out of Lewiston, read about two and a half weeks of research out of the Muskie Archives, and then I commuted a couple of days, well actually about four days, four or five days all together, to Bowdoin College and I was going through Senator Mitchell's papers and I think it was in the, I'm pretty sure it was there actually, in the Mitchell papers, like maybe the transition, she got a memo from 1977 on campaign finance and it dealt with campaign finance. Well I think that covers everything, that was a, I really enjoyed it.

LB: Well I hope you'll send me a copy of your paper. We can get it in the archives.

End of Interview

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