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Burns, Cecil Edward oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

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Interview with Cecil Edward Burns by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Burns, Cecil Edward

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

September 4, 2002

Place

Rumford, Maine

ID Number

MOH 362

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Biographical Note

Cecil Edward Burns was born May 6, 1918 in Rumford, Maine and grew up in Mexico, Maine. His parents were John R. and Rose (Paradis) Burns. His father, John, was a mill worker and tax collector, and his grandfather was a brick mason and helped build the Oxford paper mill. His brother, John, was a priest in the church that the Muskie family attended in Waterville, Maine.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: family background; Rumford community history; Mill towns in Maine; and the Oxford Paper Company.

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Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Cecil Burns at the Rumford Public Library on September 4th, the year 2002. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Mr. Burns, if we could start by you giving me your full name, including your middle name, and spelling it?

Cecil Burns: I'm Cecil Edward Burns, C-E-C-I-L, Edward, and B-U-R-N-S, Burns.

AL: And where and when were you born?

CB: Nineteen-eighteen in Rumford, Maine.

AL: And your full birth date?

CB: May 6th, 1918.

AL: And you grew up in Mexico.

CB: Yes.

AL: What was that community like when you were growing up?

CB: Well, I thought it was the best, of course. There was a built-in cleavage between Mexico and Rumford as we grew older and became competitive with each other in school, teams and etcetera, but a nice community. Of course it was a mill community, as Rumford is, supported by that mill, and things were great at times and at times they weren't so great. Many years later of course they sold to other companies and got out of town.

But it was Hugh Chisholm who built this place, this Oxford Paper Company. And he came in here when there were still Indians in the area. He came down the river from up Berlin, New Hampshire, Bethel, Maine way. And as I understood his perusal of this place in the beginning, before there was ever any mill here, there were Indians along the riverbank in many spots, and it was a delicate situation he got into. And I've read somewhere things that he has written about that. Kind of interesting. But he was a great man, he's the man that built Oxford Paper Company. He looked at the Rumford Falls up there, he saw that fall from the Androscoggin River, and envisioned that there was a great water power there, available. All you had to do was tie into it somehow or other.

I guess when he made his first invasion into this area, he was somewhat dismayed by the power or the feeling of having Indians around on the shore, and it wasn't always a safe place to come.

But he did it, by himself as I understand it, and made his way back out with the thought, well, here's a spot in Rumford where this falls is, there's great opportunities there. He had to be a brilliant man to see that. And bring something fruitful to the area where he could make a lot of money, which he did. That's my introduction as I, the very first part of my boyhood. Of course, I went to Mexico High School. You want me to talk about me?

AL: Sure, yes.

CB: I went to Mexico High School and graduated in '36.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

CB: John R. Burns, and he was an Irishman. He was born in this country, but his folks were born in Ireland. And my mother was of French extraction, she came from, she and her family, her parents came from Canada. I can't tell you when, because I don't know, but it's in the early part of the 1900s.

AL: And what was her name?

CB: Rose Paradis. She was one, a family, one girl and six boys. And she had a family of her own of one boy and six girls, no, one girl and six boys, the same as her mother; got that backwards. Delightful lady, and her family of course thought the world of her. And my dad was, he became a mill worker and he finally moved to this town when that mill was built, and his father was one of the builders.

AL: Your grandfather was a builder of the mill?

CB: Uh-hunh, one of them. He was a brick mason and they had lots of room for workers there because that mill was practically all made of brick, red brick. Much of it has been taken down and destroyed. Not destroyed, but done away with. But that's, how many years ago was that, a hundred years ago.

AL: What sort of things did your family do for social activities or, and were they political at all?

CB: Yes, my dad was a tax collector at the town of Mexico for many years when I was growing up. I'm going to say for maybe as long as fifteen years. My mother was a housewife, and a good one. Things were kind of rugged in the early days of this past century, and you had to do without. Like, there were many large families around here, that's what the population was built on then, large families. Tenements blocks to house them, and some people of course had their own, built their own homes and maintained them. But it was a tough, it was kind of tough. The war came along, WWI. My mother had five brothers in WWI; she also had five sons in WWII. And didn't, let's see. She lost a brother as a result of severe injuries that he had at that, he died in 1924, a few years after the war was over, but he carried a lot of the difficulties engineered by that war. What else did my father do? He worked in the mill and was a tax collector at the same time.

AL: Were most of your social activities centered in the home with the family, or did you go do sort of church or grange activities?

CB: Being Catholic, both my parents were staunch Catholics. And we went, the children were brought up to, they never spoke French. However, the baby, the youngest one, did latch on and learn French and could speak it fluently and wrote French. He became a Catholic priest. In this community our activities were community centered, rather than family centered, but staunch families nevertheless. And in the beginning of these two towns, many foreign elements. And there still are many foreign elements here, some that still speak fluent Italian, Lithuanian, Polish, French.

AL: So it was quite a mixture.

CB: Yeah.

AL: And what church did your family attend?

CB: St. Athanasius. And that St. Athanasius closed in, oh, I can't remember when but it's been closed I'm going to say for close to twenty years. It joined with St. Johns, which has a bigger parish and they were almost across the road from each other, they were both in Rumford. People who wanted to, were Catholic, if they wanted to go to a Catholic church, had to go to Rumford. Until they built a church in Mexico, and that was a French speaking church, and you could go to church there but a lot of the kids, as we went to church, couldn't understand one word that was going on. But we still took an active part in it. It's been a good community. It done a lot of good in a lot of ways, they're not perfect, they haven't been perfect, and they will never be, but it's been a good community to live in, to grow up in.

AL: Well, you mentioned there being a lot of ethnic diversity in the communities. Did you ever experience negative influences on that, or was it mostly pretty positive?

CB: Generally speaking, groups would segregate. There's a little portion of this town called Smithville, it's an Italian settlement. And while they were building this mill, a few entrepreneurs in the city would make trips back to Italy during the summer months, and they would entice young, big, rugged Italian boys to come here to work because they had jobs and they couldn't find them in Italy. And that became, Smithville was the name of that place, Smith's Crossing we call it. Anyway, they were a community unto themselves for a long while, and once the Irish-Catholic church opened up, that brought them together, into the mix. And first thing you know, they were intermarrying with the rest of the people around here, and there are some, been some great, good citizens to come out of that turmoil. French was a community not unto itself, but spread all over the town, both of these were predominantly French.

AL: And you mentioned Polish and Lithuanian?

CB: Yes, and they would band together, too. They would build, I don't know where they got their money, I never found that out, but they were workers probably in the mill, and they would

build these tenement blocks and they'd have maybe six different families living in that big tenement. And the town was clustered with that, all over the town, both towns as a matter of fact. Lithuanian, Polish, and Italian and French and Irish, there was a Scots settlement in the two towns.

AL: I was going to ask you that, because Hugh Chisholm was Scottish.

CB: Hugh Chisholm was Scots, yes, yeah. Hugh Chisholm had to be a very bright man. I've read of his early years as a young man, and he and two or three others used to ride the railroad cars across, back and forth across Canada, and that's where he got his start. He'd ride the railroad cars and take papers, newspapers, and sell them, going and coming, and that's where he made his first few bucks. Of course he made some big bucks after that.

But, as a matter of fact, to get back to the town again, once Hugh Chisholm built his first mill, he no more than got it finished, and he sold it to International Paper Company, and he just moved down the river another five hundred yards and he started a new mill which became Oxford Paper Company. I shouldn't leave that out, that's a big part of it.

And of course the falls up there, Hugh Chisholm was, like I told you, he was a brilliant man, he could see the use of water power and so he built an electric plant up just above the dam, just above the dam and the falls. And of course he generated electricity and sold it to all the community, including the mills. That is probably where he made his big money. He was good for this community, no question about that, no question. His sentiments as they were expressed in the mill and portrayed in the mill didn't always sit well with many of the employees, but they were thankful to have a job and they, whatever came down the pike they were going to, generally they were pretty willing to take it.

And then along around 1920, unions got into the mills, and with that goes differences of opinions, and trying to blend them. There were some ups and downs in both of those things. But pretty good community, it generated some good people in these two communities. I'm one of the people that, I'm proud of that because I was one of the lucky ones, I was able to go to college, but only after I'd worked in the mill for three years, and then started. But they have produced some decent people in this town. Better than decent; strong, really.

AL: When did you first come into contact or meet Ed Muskie or any of his family members?

CB: We both belonged to the same church, the Irish-Catholic church. And there was only one priest here at the time they opened that church, and very soon they had three priests, because the influx in that church was tremendous. And these were people that could speak English, and understand English, and they were delighted to go there. But one of the, not the pastor, one of his hirelings, understudies, began what they call Christian doctrine classes for the, mostly senior high school kids. And they took the boys at one, the boys came Tuesday, and the girls came Thursday, so they separated them, which was maybe a good idea, and a lot of good things, and that's where I met Ed Muskie for the first time. Like I say, he was four years older, and about a foot and a half taller at least, if not more than that. And these were, the priest would throw something out as a topic and discuss it, and wanted to know how the young people thought about

that. And then there would be an elaboration on it. Many times, what the kids thought was not correct, and they'd be corrected. But they enjoyed the interplay. And we had an engaging young priest that was doing this, and he caught on like wildfire, and that thing blossomed and bloomed all over the place. And it still has its effect in this town. It's not in operation any longer because they had built their own parochial school, and then they merged with St. John's who had its own French parochial school. And now there's one parish that services in the town of Rumford, and a lot of people from Mexico go to it.

AL: Do you recollect anything in particular about Ed Muskie when you first met him, looking back on it now?

CB: Ed, yeah, I do remember Ed. A very bright young man, and he carried that through his lifeline. And there would be topics up for discussion, and it's hard to get adolescents engaged in a discussion when they don't really know a lot about it. But Ed Muskie knew a lot about a lot of things that the rest of us didn't know. He was a, he must have been an excellent reader and devoted to reading. He knew a lot of things, and he taught the rest of us a lot of things just by his engaging the priest on occasion; very interesting. And those classes, those meetings, had a lot to do with the development of the youth in these two communities. And then of course, Ed went to Bates. And there were not very many of the kids around here that were able to go to college. How he did it, I don't know. I know that his father, I got to know his father after I had been married for a while and I joined the Elks, and his father was a member of the Elks. He was a brilliant man.

AL: Stephen Muskie?

CB: Yes.

AL: What do you remember about him?

CB: Well, he was a tailor, and you, I don't believe anyone's ever been a better tailor than he was. The money class in the town, the people who had big money, they would go to him, the men, and he'd make their suits, the coat and vest and trousers, and they were, oh, anything that was made by Mr. Muskie didn't have any sign on it except his excellence. He was just fantastic at that, and he stayed at it for a long time. He must have been, I'm guessing that he had to be at least seventy when he closed his shop up. And that's when I met him at the Elks. He'd go there in the afternoon to, some of the older fellows would get together and they'd play rummy two or three hours during the afternoon, and they enjoyed each other, and enjoyed the game. I was very young then, I was in my twenties.

AL: So this would have been in the late forties or early fifties?

CB: Yeah.

AL: What, did you ever, do you recollect anything that he talked about, or in terms of Ed Muskie, in terms of his son and what he'd done?

CB: No, not in the political world. They had a good size family; I'm going to say maybe five or six children?

AL: Yes, six.

CB: Six.

AL: Yup.

CB: One of them married a cousin of mine; one of the girls married a cousin of mine. His name was Henry Paradis.

AL: Okay, Lucy.

CB: Lucy Paradis, right, yeah.

AL: Yes.

CB: But you found out, you found out a lot by just knowing these kids. Their family life must have been strict, but I think the children, each of them, they were cautious about how they were, how they addressed a topic when other people were involved. You know, rather than, they were not pushy, they were brilliant. It seems to me Ed had another brother, but -

AL: Yes.

CB: I can't remember his name, but I was not familiar with him. But when Ed spoke, you listened. The priests were listening, too. He had that early. Of course he cut quite a figure at Bates [College]; he was an excellent student down there.

AL: And a debater as well, which I believe he started learning in high school here in Rumford.

CB: Yeah, I'm not surprised, I think I've read that somewhere. He was an outstanding debater. He was quite a politician. He had to be a debater.

AL: I heard a lot of people grew wonderful gardens in this area, and Ed Muskie's father was one of them.

CB: Yeah, I'm not surprised with that.

AL: Is that something that seems to hold great value in this community, having a garden, you know, a wonderful garden?

CB: Well, I think it was, it was as much to put food on the table as anything else. This was not an affluent community. It wasn't until, I'm going to say WWII, because during the Second World War, the people that stayed around here, that were not in the, the men that were not in the service, they could make all the money they wanted to make. All they had to do was work

double shifts, that sort of thing, and people were willing to do that to enhance their family life, home life.

Ed Muskie was a good athlete in high school, played basketball, played a lot of basketball. Of course, he was built for it, long and lean, but a real competitor, and as we found out in the political field, a real competitor there, too.

I think the people of Rumford are really proud of Ed Muskie, and they well should be, in my opinion. And I think that opinion is kind of prevalent around here. He was a good thinker, he could think on his feet. And of course this mill, with the International and the Oxford side by side, all the excrement that came out of those mills was flushed right into the river. Ed Muskie started, after he got in politics, he made them stand right up and take notice, because his was the Clean Water Act that he was interested in, he developed it as a matter of fact. He made these companies, he became an adversary of them, he made these companies clean that river up. And, above us, up through Bethel and Berlin, you know, it was a clean, he was in Washington at that time, and he pushed that through and he made a big change in everything around here.

Of course, while he was doing that, he was an antagonist to the mill. And I know for sure that they knew he was right, there was no question of avoiding this. It's just, they were hiding everything and none of us knew it. But Ed found out about it. How he found out I don't know, whether he hired people to help him in the project. He must have. Because the effluence that excreted from those mills were dumped right out into the river, they had big chutes that came out. What did they call them? They called them, uh, whatever, and the river was always covered with this foam stuff that was dumped in the river.

AL: So as a child growing up in this community, you saw the rivers looking pretty bad yourself?

CB: Oh, it was. And smell, terribly toxic smell. And they put out, what do we call that, ash, those big smoke stacks that were up in the air, you know were, those things were pumping that stuff out every day twenty four hours a day. And mothers would do their own washing, hang it out to dry on the clothesline, they go and take it up when it was dry and here's this, like somebody had peppered it all. It got very bad. And I think Ed had guts enough to do that, and very few people would tangle with the likes of those two, International Paper and Oxford. But then it got to be a project all over the country. We should stand up and salute him for that, because he changed things around in grand style as a result of that Clean Water Act. I don't know whether Ed got in the service or not, I don't think he did.

AL: He was in the Navy.

CB: He was? See, I didn't know that.

AL: Did you know him later on, after you'd both -?

CB: Yes, see, my youngest brother became a Catholic priest, and after he was ordained, the second place he went to was Augusta. And Ed was the governor and he was a Rumford boy and

he knew my brother Lee, and that was the church that he went to anyway. And so they cordoned off a section just for the Muskie family. And Ed was awfully good to my brother, very good to him. He's been good to a lot of people around here.

AL: Did you follow Ed's, Ed Muskie's political career? Were you interested in politics?

CB: I was interested, but about the time that he went to, that got him at Washington, my wife and I, and we have two children, we had moved to California. I came back here after graduating from Colby and coached at Mexico, which was my school. That's all, I didn't want to teach, I wanted to coach. But in order to coach, I had to teach, and that's the way they hired you. But then, when I got that job, my biggest competitor is Rumford and they're three or four times as big as Mexico in their enrollment in schools. So then Rumford, I coached football and basketball, and their football teams were just about three times as big as ours. But that's all I wanted to do, I wanted to coach. I knew that's what I wanted to do, but I had to teach in order to do it. And I was, I enjoyed teaching. I had an older brother that was a teacher as well.

AL: And so what year did you go to California?

CB: Nineteen fifty-five. I resigned over there because I had gone to California that summer, I'd gone through the Elks, had gone through the chairs in the Elks, became Exalted Ruler, that's the top job, and I went to a, where they all meet, a convention, Elks convention, it was in L.A. My wife and I went out there, we took a week before, and ten days of the convention, and then a week afterwards. And while I was out there, I scouted, I applied for a job. I had a few friends out there that I knew, I knew some from the service, but there were a couple of kids out there that had gone from Mexico and Rumford to that, to the Los Angeles area of California. I got a job out there during that visitation. I was interviewing every day.

AL: What kind of work?

CB: Teacher. And of course, they paid just about three times what I was being paid in Mexico, with no coaching job, just teaching.

AL: That's hard to turn down.

CB: I didn't turn it down, no. We bought a home, stayed around out there. And then, that's where I watched Muskie from a distance, while he was operating. He's one of the nicest things that's happened to these two towns. There's no question in the mind of many, many, many, many people around here. He was good for us, he was informative to us, he kept people knowledgeable about what he was trying to do. And you know how easy he is to communicate with. He could talk to all levels of the community around here, and never took a back seat for anybody. Very bright, very bright man, and a good man.

When that brother of mine, when he was the governor of Maine, my youngest brother, of course knowing Ed was from Rumford, that, those, oh, they struck up a nice relationship. Ed and Ed's wife were very good to my brother, and they had children there, he was helping with their children, etcetera. They enjoyed each other. She's a delightful woman, Ed's wife. But of course,

Ed was a delightful guy, too.

I don't, in the meantime, while I was going through the chairs in the Elks, I was a member for some time before I got into the chairs, three years I think before I got going through the chairs. Anyway, that's when I met his father. And I know where Ed got his disposition; he got it much from his, probably his mother. But also, his father was a very engaging man, delightful man to know, brilliant. And you could talk to him about anything, because I think he must have helped write some of the newspapers, he read everything I guess. Nice man, too. They had a nice family.

AL: Did Stephen Muskie ever show a sense of humor?

CB: Oh sure, yeah. I go back to high school days now, when he would, he had just gotten out of high school when I went in, but I had a brother that was in high school when he was, but he was, my brother was in Mexico, he was in Rumford. And they were competing against each other, basketball. But those athletic teams, their biggest contribution is that they learn to live with each other. Everyone thinks it's to win, it is to win ball games, if you're a coach it's to win ball games and maintain your job, but the idea of interscholastic athletics is to branch out and meet other people from other communities, and be engaged against them. And the sport itself has done a lot of encouraging for a lot of people, not only at these towns but every town. Of course there are some ill feelings that are brought up, but they subside after a while.

When Armistice Day used to roll around here, Mexico would play Rumford, that was the final game of football, and it was always Mexico against Rumford. One year they played in Mexico, the next year they played at Rumford, back and forth.

But there were gangs, adolescent gangs in those days, as there are today, and they'd get a couple of car loads of kids from Rumford would come tearing through Mexico in the early evening, while it was still light so you could identify each other. And, just raising a little hell, but sometimes it got out of hand, and they got fighting. And then when the game started the next day, we kept both sides of the field, ones against the other. But when it's all over it was good for both communities. Good for the kids and both, good for both communities. Because very soon guys from Mexico would meet girls from Rumford, they'd date, and the first thing you know they got married, and vice versa. And that quelled a lot of that stuff, it put a blanket over it because now you got kids, their parents are from both towns, rather than just from one. And that, that was a good thing.

AL: As you stated earlier, many people in this community are really proud of what Ed Muskie did, and that he was from here. I've also heard, from time to time, people who have said that maybe they felt he didn't connect with Rumford enough when he went into the Senate. Have you ever heard those feelings as well?

CB: I'm sure they were there, I'm sure they were there. But that's because we're little people. We're not as big people as we think we are in these two towns. He was dealing on a different level, and he thought dealing with the, he wasn't, didn't, he shouldn't have been dealing with the run of the mill citizen of this town. For their benefit, yes, but not individually. And when he

was at the state level, now, it wasn't that way. He had his hand into a lot of things for the local people that he was serving; he was down in Waterville for a long time.

AL: Is there anything, any additional recollections that I haven't asked you about specifically that you recall of the Muskie family, or Ed Muskie?

CB: Jeepers, I don't think so. I would say, if you were to ask me a question, I'm not going to put it that way. Let me pose, just make a statement, that if we were to evaluate the people from Rumford and the people from Mexico and their feelings separately about Ed Muskie, you'd find out in very short order, seventy-five percent would favor Muskie, from both towns. And these two towns are as different as can be, and there's a friction there, always has been, but has subsided. I can see it now that it has subsided. While I was growing up I couldn't see it because it wasn't there. But there's a good feeling among these two towns now, and I think Ed probably had a good part in that. He could talk to anybody, it didn't make any difference which community they came from, and he would talk to anybody. He was a down-to-earth guy, but he had a good head on his shoulders, he had a great mind, I think.

AL: Well, great, thank you very much for your time.

CB: My pleasure.

End of Interview