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Carson, Everett C. "Brownie" oral history interview

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Interview with Everett C. “Brownie” Carson by Andrea L’Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Carson, Everett C. “Brownie”

Interviewer

L’Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

April 26, 2002

Place

Augusta, Maine

ID Number

MOH 340

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Biographical Note

Brownie Carson was born on November 15, 1947 in Lexington, Virginia to Robert J. and Elizabeth Carson. He grew up in the Shenandoah Valley and vacationed in Maine. He graduated from Bowdoin College and the University of Maine School of Law. When Muskie was Senator, Carson was among a group of anti-war Vietnam veterans. He also served in the Marine Corps in Vietnam. Carson took part in the Edwards Dam removal ceremony in July 1999. He worked at Pine Tree Legal Assistance from 1977 to 1983. At the time of the interview, he worked for the Natural Resources Council of Maine.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Carson’s family, educational, and military background; Anti-Vietnam War recollections; political involvement with Hathaway and Muskie; Muskie/Hathaway environmental work and legislation; and the Natural Resources Council of Maine.

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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Everett Brownie Carson -

Brownie Carson: It's just Brownie Carson.

AL: Just Brownie, okay. At the Natural Resources Council of Maine in Augusta, Maine on April the 26th, the year 2002, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. If you could start by just stating your full name and spelling it for me.

BC: I'm Brownie Carson, B-R-O-W-N-I-E, C-A-R-S-O-N.

AL: And where and when were you born?

BC: November 15th, 1947 in Lexington, Virginia.

AL: And where did you grow up, in Virginia?

BC: Grew up in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia.

AL: And what type of area of the country is that, in terms of economically, socially, politically, religiously?

BC: The Shenandoah Valley is a beautiful rural area of southwestern Virginia, predominantly small towns, magnificent rivers, hills, the Appalachian Mountains, Blue Ridge Mountains. This town I grew up in, Lexington, is home to two colleges, both of them small, Virginia Military Institute and Washington Lee University. So it's a atypical small southern town of about five thousand population where there was a pretty diverse population of everyone from farmers to people working in manufacturing. My father had a middle level management job in manufacturing, carpet manufacturing plant, to college professors and retirees, so it was an interesting and diverse small community.

AL: And growing up in that community, did you get a sense of going on to higher education, or what were your experiences like in school?

BC: My father is a college graduate, was a college graduate. My mother is an artist who attended the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts, and there was the expectation that the kids in my family would go on to higher education.

AL: And you have how many brothers and sisters?

BC: Two older brothers.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

BC: Robert J. Carson, born in 1913, and Elizabeth Carson, born in 1917.

AL: And did they come from other areas of the country?

BC: They both came from Germantown, a suburb of Philadelphia.

AL: I see that you are a graduate of Bowdoin College. What was the connection with Maine, is that when you first came to Maine or heard about it?

BC: No, my father was a Bowdoin graduate, and one of my older brothers was a Bowdoin graduate, class of 1965. And we had spent summers as a family in New England, in New Hampshire, where my mother had spent her summers. And my father had gone to a boy's camp back, I guess, in the twenties called Flying Moose Lodge in East Orland, Maine, which still exists, run by a [the Price] family. It's a trip camp, the kids are on rivers and in the mountains all week and they're just back getting things ship shape, then going back out. And my oldest brother actually went to that camp, and his son went to that camp for one summer. So, from New Hampshire I came to Maine, did canoeing, did hiking. And then my father, who had been a small boat skipper in the Navy in WWII, wanted to come back to Maine and do a little sailing on the coast and we did that for a week on two separate summers while I was a teenager. And those experiences, which really were my connection to the Maine environment and Maine people, persuaded me that I would like to live in Maine. So it seemed to make sense to go to college where you wanted to live, so I applied for and was accepted to Bowdoin.

AL: And what year did you graduate?

BC: I graduated in 1972, I was the class of 1969.

AL: And what did you major in at Bowdoin?

BC: Nothing really. I took education courses and history courses, government courses and enough sociology courses to get a nominal major in it, but I was interested in a lot of things. That was after my Vietnam experience. I started Bowdoin in '65 and didn't finish until '72.

AL: And you had two or three years?

BC: About three years, yeah.

AL: So, did you have a sense of wanting to do something with your career in the field of environmentalism at that time?

BC: No, I didn't have the foggiest idea what I wanted to do when I came to Maine.

AL: When did that sort of start to evolve?

BC: Well, I always loved the out of doors and I decided, in particular after my Vietnam experience and getting engaged in a program at Upward, at Bowdoin, after my military service called Upward Bound, a program that works with low income high school students from rural Maine, that I'd like to go to law school because it seemed to be, a law degree seemed to be a good tool for helping to create social change. And [I] first went to work in Pine Tree Legal Assistance and spent six years there after law school, and then came over to the Natural Resources Council. But I'd always been interested in environmental law and related issues, and there was an opening here for an attorney and I applied for it and got it.

AL: And you've been here since, what, nineteen years now?

BC: I've been here since 1983, so eighteen and a half; eighteen as executive director.

AL: Now, when you came back from Vietnam you were among a group of Vietnam vets who protested the Vietnam War, is that correct?

BC: I did get involved with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War in, really in '70 after Kent State and the Jackson State killings, and then even more actively in 1971 when the vets gathered in, in Washington, D.C. to return our medals.

AL: And did you have contact with Senator Muskie in regards to that?

BC: I had a little bit of contact with Senator Muskie. He was not an early opponent of the Vietnam War, as some other political figures, including then Congressman Bill Hathaway, later Senator Hathaway. And so I had more contact with Senator Hathaway than I did with Senator Muskie, although I had some contact with him.

AL: And what, do you have any recollections of your contacts with Bill Hathaway and later Senator Muskie?

BC: I have many recollections, and they relate to both being in Washington and lobbying informally I think you would say, at least not as a skilled lobbyist, with the Maine congressional delegation for an early end to the Vietnam War. And also for amnesty for any young men, there may have been young women although I wasn't aware of it if there were, who might have gone

to Canada, or chosen to go to jail rather than serve in the military in Vietnam. So I had some conversations with each member of the delegation, including Senator Muskie, and of course he was a figure larger than life and very, very prominent. So whenever important public policy issues were discussed he was there.

And I spoke at the 1970 state Democratic convention as a representative of students, college students, in Maine in favor of an end to the war, and I don't recall that was an election year for Senator Muskie, I think he'd been reelected in 1968 [*sic* 1970], although I'm not crystal clear about that. But he was there and I guess that's really when I first met him and had a conversation with him.

And then in 1972 I decided, initially on a whim almost, but then got quite seriously involved in a campaign as the candidate, or as a candidate in the campaign for Maine's first district congressional seat running against then incumbent first district congressman, Peter Kyros. And there were, there were what people called two wings of the Party in those days, this is now thirty years ago. There was a somewhat more, conservative may not be the right word but a somewhat more mainstream part of the Party led by Senator Muskie and at a much, much lower level by Peter Kyros. And then a more liberal or progressive arm of the Party in which I think Bill Hathaway and Governor Curtis fit or placed themselves, and I was more a part of the left side of the Democratic Party in those days.

And as I campaigned for congress in the primary season, I obviously, I didn't win, had a wonderful experience, but I ran into Bill Hathaway many, many times along the campaign trail. I prominently wore a "Hathaway for U.S. Senate" button and spoke a lot about Hathaway and hoping that he would be successful, as he was, in his race against then Senator Margaret Chase Smith.

I also did something that was fairly unpopular. I was actively backing Senator George McGovern for the 1972 presidential Democratic nomination because he was avowedly and openly anti-war. And at that point Senator Muskie hadn't said where he was on the issue, so we didn't see eye to eye. He, were he still alive, might not remember that political season fondly, at least in terms of my involvement, I don't know.

AL: Yeah, so you were pretty vocal about, or were you quiet about your support of McGovern?

BC: Oh, I was absolutely up front. I wore a McGovern button, a "Carson for Congress" button, and a "Hathaway for U.S. Senate" button for several months straight. And it was a little awkward because Muskie was the favorite son. And, you know, it really looked, well, of course the incident at the *Manchester Union Leader* where he became so emotional, justifiably so I think, but that really did a lot of damage to his presidential campaign and I don't think he ever really, ever really recovered.

I mean, he was a tremendous vice presidential candidate in 1968, an election in which I was not old enough to vote, November of '68, but was an infantry platoon commander in the Marines in Vietnam, a certain irony there. But I think his stature and the impression that he made on the

American people, and the work that he had done on environment and a variety of other issues would have stood him in good stead as a presidential candidate and a president had he been elected in 1972. I'm not sure anybody could have beaten Richard Nixon in 1972. I think McGovern's race was something of a pipe dream, and whether Senator Muskie could have done better, tough to tell at this point.

AL: Did you get a sense of what issues regarding the Vietnam War he struggled with, because I mean he did change his stance on the Vietnam war (*unintelligible phrase*)?

BC: He did, when he became Humphrey's, I'm sorry, when he, not when he became Humphrey's running mate, but he, well, how to answer that question. I didn't talk to him enough to really understand clearly what issues he was wrestling with.

AL: And so at the same time, he was quite a leader and influential in environmental legislation in the Senate.

BC: Very, very much so.

AL: And that was an interest of yours, but a little later?

BC: It was at the time, a secondary interest. The war and issues related to the war really were my primary interests. And I would hasten to say that I did not fully appreciate the work that Senator Muskie had done, and the leadership that he had provided on environmental issues until much later.

AL: So looking back on it from that view, knowing now more than you did then about his leadership role, does that, well I guess what I'm asking is what is your perception of Senator Muskie in the overall scheme of things?

BC: Well, I think, two things I guess. I think he left at least two very important legacies, politically and personally, because of the kind of individual that he was. First was he, and I'm sure many have talked about this, he was very largely responsible for creating a viable and later thriving Democratic Party in Maine to ensure that Maine had a two party system, because it had been so dominated by Republicans for so long. And then nationally his work, I think his work on the environment as the principal author of the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act and other related legislation stands, still, as a truly remarkable legacy for the country.

If you talk to people as I have from time to time who were in meetings with those, with Senator Muskie and some of his colleagues on both sides of the aisle who created that legislation, Democrats and Republicans alike, they really had a vision for pollution free rivers. In fact, the language of the federal Clean Water Act says, "to eliminate all pollutants in," I can't remember the exact language, but essentially to eliminate all pollution in any toxic amount from the rivers within a certain period of time. It was too short to be realistic, but it clearly articulated a vision. And I think the Clean Air Act spoke to a similar vision of care for the environment, a clear responsibility to take care of the public health in this country to protect our people as well as our natural resources. And he, more than anybody else, made that happen. It was pretty odd,

because I can't imagine he and Richard Nixon, who signed most of that legislation, were close friends. I've never listened or actually written anything that he said about Nixon, but Nixon was a horse of a whole different color.

AL: Do, here at the Natural Resources Council, do you ever use some of the legislation, I mean is it well known in the background of what you do?

BC: Oh, absolutely. We, I personally quote both the preamble and the actual language of the federal statutes. We talk about Senator Muskie's vision, Senator Mitchell's vision, and he really inherited and I think as a staffer undoubtedly helped to create some of that, and it does a couple of things. It gives us a legacy of responsibility as an organization and individuals who care deeply about Maine's environment and the national environment, and it is a source of inspiration for us in a very real way. I mean, if it had been Joe Blow from Kansas who created this, the nation's environmental laws it wouldn't have quite the same effect on us, I don't think. Maine has a real position of leadership and a true responsibility to be a leader in conservation and environmental issues, and I think we struggle to live up to that responsibility.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you feel is important to add today, in talking about Senator Muskie and the environment?

BC: No, I'm not -

AL: Any anecdotes?

BC: You know, I, I guess one of the reasons why I had some hesitation about being interviewed for this is that I didn't know the senator well, and I was never on the campaign trail with him, I was never on his staff, so, I knew of him and knew him just a little bit. His life and his work during his life didn't really have a big impact on me until much later. I mean, the Natural Res--, there are other people associated with the National Resources Council. One of our founders, Bill Townsend, who spent a lot of time talking to Senator Muskie because we were on the other side, this organization before my time was on the other side of the Dickey-Lincoln Dam project. And Senator Muskie and then Congressman Hathaway did a lot of work on that project and so they, I mean there was a lot of give and take. There wasn't, I mean Senator Muskie was actually out of, he of course was secretary of state in '79-'80 [*sic* 1980-81] and then was out of the Senate, and I didn't get here until '83. So it was, it's not as if we worked together the way I and others here have, with other leading Maine political figures.

AL: I think it was important to talk to you, especially in terms of the Vietnam vets protesting the Vietnam War. We don't have a lot of perspectives on that and it's important to understand that group and what they felt, and how it possibly affected Senator Muskie's career, his stance.

BC: Yeah, I mean we, I'm not sure that the work of the Vietnam vets affected his views. It was, unfortunately, a source of frustration to us that Maine's most important political leader, which certainly is what Senator Muskie was at the time, wasn't really clear and strong in his opposition to the war

I, you know, and I don't really, I asked Neil Rolde not long ago if there's a really good, definitive biography of Senator Muskie, and he said, "No, there isn't." I said, "Neil, why don't you write one, because one really needs to be written." I mean, he's written about Baxter, he's written a history of the state. I mean, you know, somebody really ought to write one, and maybe out of these oral histories some history professor at Bates will decide to do that, I don't know. Maybe it'll be you.

AL: Maybe. Well, I think that's all the questions I had.

BC: Oh, okay. I thought we were going to -

AL: Thank you very much.

End of Interview