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Coffin, Frank Morey and Nicoll, Don oral history interview

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Interview with Don Nicoll and Frank Coffin by Erin Griffiths and Chris Beam

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Coffin, Frank Morey

Nicoll, Don

Interviewer

Griffiths, Erin

Beam, Chris

Date

November 20, 1996

Place

Portland, Maine

ID Number

MOH 011

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Biographical Note

Don Nicoll

Donald Eugene "Don" Nicoll was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on August 4, 1927, and grew up in the West Roxbury section of the city. He is the son of George and Mary Nicoll. He attended Robert Gould Shaw Junior High School and Boston English High School and graduated from Colby College in Waterville, Maine in 1949, majoring in History with a minor in Government. Don met his future wife, Hilda Farnum, also a Colby student, when they worked in the resort town of Ocean Park, Maine, in the summer of 1944. Nicoll began his graduate work at Pennsylvania State College in 1949, where he received a teaching fellowship in the Department of History. His graduate studies concentrated on American history, specifically the period from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War .. His M.A. (1952) thesis was on the Alien and Sedition Acts.

Starting in 1951, Nicoll and his family settled in Buckfield, Maine where he picked apples and taught part time at Stephen's High School, located in Rumford. Nicoll began working as an announcer for WLAM radio in Lewiston, Maine. He became a reporter and then news editor for WLAM and WLAM-TV. In June 1954, Nicoll left WLAM to become Executive Secretary of the Democratic State Committee at the request of Frank M. Coffin, who has just become chairman.

Mr. Coffin was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from Maine's Second Congressional District in 1956 and Nicoll went to Washington, DC, as his administrative assistant, continuing in that post until December 1960, the end of Congressman Coffin's second term. Mr. Coffin ran for governor in 1960 and was defeated. After the election Senator Edmund S. Muskie asked Nicoll to join his staff as legislative assistant and news secretary. Nicoll served in that position until 1962, when he became administrative assistant. He continued in that post until 1971, when he became personal advisor to Senator Muskie. He left the senate office in mid-1972.

From 1972 until his retirement in 2005 Nicoll worked as a program and policy planner, first as a consultant (1972-73), then as chairman and chief executive officer of the New England Land Grant Universities Joint Operations Committee (1973-1975), then as coordinator of planning and vice president for planning and public affairs for the Maine Medical Center (1975-1986), then as a consultant (1986-2005). His clients were primarily in the non-profit sector and included universities, libraries, education associations, health care organizations and social service agencies. He also worked as a volunteer, heading a variety of public policy projects, including the Maine Task Force on Government Reorganization, the Maine State Compensation Commission, the Maine (Mental Health) Systems Assessment Commission, the Maine Consortium for Health Professions Education, the Southern Maine Community Television Consortium, the Maine Special Commission on Government Reorganization (co-chair), the Board of Visitors of the University of Southern Maine's Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, the Maine-Aomori Sister-State Advisory Council and the Governor's Allagash Wilderness Waterway Working Group.

From 1998-2005, Don Nicoll was the Director of the Edmund S. Muskie Oral History Project at Bates College.

Frank Coffin

Frank Morey Coffin was born in Lewiston, Maine on July 11, 1919. His parents were Ruth [Morey] and Herbert Coffin, who divorced when Frank was twelve. Ruth raised Frank alone on Wood St. in Lewiston. She came from an active Democratic family, her father was Mayor of Lewiston from 1907 to 1912, and eventually she became a Democratic State Committeewoman

Frank graduated from the Lewiston public schools, and then went on to Bates College, graduating in 1940. While at Bates he debated under Brooks Quimby, and majored in economics. He then went off to Harvard to continue his education. He started in the Harvard Business School while waiting to be drafted. He served in the Navy Supply Corps, and after discharge returned to Harvard to get a law degree. He graduated in 1947. He then clerked for U.S. District Court Judge John Clifford Jr. before his admittance to the Maine Bar.

His law career began in a Lewiston office, and quickly grew. From 1951 to 1954 he served as Corporation Counsel to the City of Lewiston, and in 1953 he joined the law firm of Verrill Dana in Portland, Maine. At that time, he became interested in the Maine Democratic Party. Along with Lewiston area Democratic activists, he worked to reestablish the two-party system in Maine. He became Chairman of the Maine Democratic Party in 1954, and worked to field Democratic candidates for every major office for the 1954 ballot. He also created the first permanent staff position within the Maine Democratic Party.

His party building included writing a party platform using public input and surveys. These efforts led to the election of Edmund Muskie as Governor of Maine. In 1956, Coffin stepped down from the chairmanship to run for United States Congress. He was elected, and served from 1957 to 1960, when he stepped down to run for Governor of Maine. He was defeated in that race. After his elected service, Frank was to be appointed Ambassador to Panama by President John Kennedy. When Kennedy was assassinated, Lyndon Johnson refused to make the appointment because of disagreements he had with Frank during his Congressional career. He was appointed to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in Paris in 1964. In 1965, President Johnson appointed Frank to the United States 1st District Court of Appeals. He became chief judge in 1972, serving in that capacity for eleven years. He became senior member in 1989.

Frank Coffin has received numerous awards and accolades, and is a highly regarded figure in Maine law and political circles. In 1942 he married a Bates graduate, Ruth Ulrich. They had four children.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Coffin's education and political background; Nicoll's early background; 1954 campaign questionnaire; political and economic climate in Maine in 1954; Democratic Party in the 1950s; influence of Muskie's 1954 gubernatorial campaign; WLAM; 1954 campaign contributors; and the significance of the 1954 campaign.

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Chris Beam: Okay, we're recording.

Erin Griffiths: I'm Erin Griffiths and I'm here with Frank M. Coffin and Donald E. Nicoll. Also with me is Chris Beam, my thesis advisor. We're in Judge Coffin's office in Portland, Maine and the date is Wednesday, November 20th, 1996, at 9:45 AM. I'm conducting this interview as a research for my senior thesis on Maine's 1954 Gubernatorial Election. The main focus of the interview will be on the '54 campaign, primarily the Democratic involvement and candidates, and even more specifically Edmund Muskie. So, the first thing I'd like to ask is if you could give me some background information on your education, when you became involved in Maine politics, when you first met Ed Muskie and how you became involved with him. Start with you, Judge Coffin, please?

Frank M. Coffin: Well, I, my background of education was in the Lewiston public schools and a small bucolic college named Bates in the class of 1940. I just, I narrowly missed Ed Muskie who was in the class of '36, didn't know him in college days, although both of us debated. My first acquaintance with Ed Muskie after we both had gone to law school, we both had been in the Navy and we both had come back to Maine to practice our profession. Ed Muskie was the head of the Office of Price Stabilization in Maine, traveling all over the state, in which office he developed a very deep and broad knowledge of the state which served him in good stead later on. At one point he had called me to ask me to be his general counsel, and I couldn't because I had my own practice that made demands on me and I didn't want to leave it at that time. Later on we met, but this was sometime after, I think, I met Don Nicoll who is with me today. My own entry

into politics came after I'd been giving a number of speeches about the Democratic Party. I'd given the keynote speech in 1950 and I'd done a number of talks being highly critical of the party and its tendency to shoot itself in the foot and be content with just being a series of tribal chieftains in the mill cities of the state. And at one point Don Nicoll interviewed me and, as he would, as he has testified, he urged me to take a more active role. I did let the establishment in Androscoggin County know of my interest in taking a more active role. And these were office holders and members of the county committee and candidates, all of whom had a much higher claim on the state committee posts from that county than I did, but they willingly made room for me and I became a member of the state committee. And then subsequently worked with Don who, this is another story, we worked on the platform committee, but that's about all I'll say now about my entry into politics.

EG: Thank you. Don Nicoll?

Don Nicoll: Yes, um, I'm a native of Boston. Grew up there and went to the public schools in that city and I went to an equally bucolic college, Colby, in Waterville, Maine. And after Colby went to Penn State and earned my masters degree, both degrees were in history, with a minor in government, and came to Maine in the fall of 1951. And literally wandered into radio work, first as an announcer and copywriter, then as a reporter, and by 1953 was editor and reporter for WLAM TV in Lewiston and covering largely politics at the state level and in the city of Lewiston.

And as Frank as indicated, he was making speeches about the Democratic Party. And on the basis of what I had observed as a reporter covering the State House and covering the activities of various office holders, including the congressional delegation, I had come to the conclusion that the state was ripe for a Democratic victory. And thought that the second district in particular was a likely spot because, although it was not generally known, the then member of Congress from the old second district was an alcoholic and had real troubles functioning. And I thought that a real challenge to him would result in a victory and I thought Frank was an ideal candidate. He resisted that suggestion, said he had no intention of running for Congress. And in the fall of 1953 Louis Jalbert, who was a state legislator and prominent Democrat from Lewiston, very ingenious fellow in many ways, cooked up the scheme of having what he called a reverse press conference [Frank Coffin's recollection is that the reverse press conference occurred in the spring of 1953, not the fall].

And the reporters that covered the State House, political writers, were invited to attend a news conference at the old Augusta House at which meeting the Democratic leadership would have a chance to question the reporters. And it was at that session that I met, first met, Ed Muskie and had a chance to observe him. Frank and Ruth, Ed and Jane and several other party leaders were at that session, and I continued to talk to Frank about running. And in the fall/winter, or in the winter of 1953-54, the then state chairman of the Democratic Party, Jimmy Sawyer, named Frank to chair a pre-convention platform committee in preparation for the state convention of March 1954 which was held in Lewiston. And I confess that although I was a reporter at the time, I was busy in my private time helping Frank prepare the survey that led to the proposals for the platform and assisted informally through that spring.

EG: Thank you. I was going to ask you about the platform committee and the grass roots platform, etc., later on but since it was brought up now maybe you could tell me a little bit about the questionnaire that was sent out and to whom it was sent out, and how much it really played in the formation of the platform?

FC: I think this was a very significant step in the evolution of events mainly because it was competing with nothing, and this is the rather fallow time before election year, this is in the late fall and winter as Don has said. We designed a series of questions in every field of state government: education, agriculture, transportation, industry, economic development, and we sent the questionnaire out to about, I would say, was it a couple of thousand people?

DN: Yup.

FC: And one of the first jobs that both Don and I worked together on was just stuffing envelopes and licking stamps as we sent this out. Then we followed that up with holding meetings in various parts of the state and interest began to build. We sent the questionnaire to Republicans, Democrats and independents and we'd hold these meetings with whoever would come, in various parts of the state. And the press began to pay attention because this had been, this was a novel approach to the platform, which otherwise would have been thrown together in a smoke filled room during a night of convention. And so we came to the Democratic convention in the spring of '54 with a very well worked out and lengthy and quite detailed platform that had caught the eye of the press. And they thought well of this, but they thought we were going nowhere because they thought we had no candidates.

DN: We should note that the people to whom the questionnaire went ranged all the way from members of the governor's cabinet to League of Women Voters members, school superintendents, municipal officials, party leaders, union

FC: Tell, tell them the, tell Erin the reaction of one of the cabinet members to you at WLAM.

DN: Yes, during the late winter of '54, Governor Cross came to WLAM to be interviewed on one of the early programs that the station had, and he brought with him Doc Fisher who was the commissioner of the then Human Services, it was called the Department of Human Services in those days. And when they walked in the door I was there as a member of the news panel. I think there were three of us who were going to interview the governor. And as they walked in the door [Dean] Doc Fisher [M.D.] was waving this questionnaire that he had received and making very loud and scatological jokes about the Democrats and what did they think they were doing and this showed how silly they were. And I smiled quietly and said nothing.

FC: Because they didn't know you were at all involved with it.

DN: That's right.

EG: Okay, um, could you talk about the political and economic situation in Maine? How do you think that played a role in the '54 campaign?

FC: I think we were, we were not in good shape economically. I say that principally because our major thrust throughout was economic development. We had, let's see, this was in the late '50s and we had not shared in the general increase in prosperity of the rest of the country, to the extent the rest of the country had, and this is sort of traditional, I guess. We lag behind both in times of prosperity and then in times of depression (we may be lagging behind in going down but we don't,) [*substitute this for what's in parentheses for clarity: we don't catch up because*] we start from a low position.

The Democratic Party had been, as I intimated earlier, chiefly located in the big cities, although there were pockets of loyal Democrats who had been with the party ever since the days of Williams Jennings Bryan, I guess. And in the early days of this century when Wilson had been president, we did have a Democratic government just before Wilson was elected. My grandfather had been Speaker of the House two years before Wilson was elected. And we'd had of course, in FDR's time, a congressman and a governor from the Democratic Party. So we were not prosperous, the Democrats were not powerful.

The Republicans, I really can't set myself up to supply you with expertise on that. You'd better go to people who are in that party. But they were divided, that is Governor Cross was, had been opposed by a very substantial faction including former Governor Payne and Leroy Hussey and a number of other people, so they were split. And people in the state had been used to choosing between fairly liberal and fairly conservative people solely in the Republican primary. And Fred Payne and Margaret Smith really got the vote of a great many people who would become in the future Democrats because they represented the liberal side of the Republican Party.

So economically and politically, things were ready to go if only the Democrats could be pulled together and stand for something more substantial than a few postmasterships from a Democratic president.

DN: I think that Frank's last note on patronage is an important one. Nineteen fifty two, when General Eisenhower was elected president, ended a very long period from 1933, almost twenty years, when the Democrats in Maine had only, except for a couple of congressional races and the governorship in '32, had only patronage to sustain them. And as a consequence, many of the fights over leadership positions revolved around the power that went with it to control patronage. Nineteen fifty two, that was wiped out and a number of the Democratic leaders who had been active in the party, and who were quite tired at that point, tended to withdraw, leaving only your rank and file Democrats plus some of the new leaders who emerged following the end of WWII.

On the Republican side, the state patronage that had existed for a long time was now compounded by the national patronage and so the focus in that party was over control of what you could parcel out to your friends. And the only thing I'd add to Frank's comments about the party, the Republican Party at that time, was that they had had a bitter fight in 1952 on the senatorial race as well as the gubernatorial race. And that had been preceded by the liquor scandal which whatever the merits of the debate in that, undermined confidence in the party, left it not unlike what we see today in all the complaints about campaign contributions at the state level, control of the liquor market was an issue of corruption in the eyes of many of the voters. On top of that you had a congressional delegation that, with the exception of Senator Smith, who

was a bright star, was, and Senator Paine who was a highly competent public figure, the rest of them ranged from dull to duller to almost incompetent in the House seats, and that meant that there was a vacuum.

This was also a period, looking at the economics, of probably the biggest slide downward in the exodus of textile jobs and shoe jobs, which were the major, you had three industrial bases in Maine essentially: shoes, textiles and pulp and paper, and of the three only pulp and paper remained relatively strong. And if my memory serves me correctly, 1954 through about 1957 were recession years nationally and Maine got hit harder than the national level. That really hit home politically.

FC: I have to come in with a footnote. When you referred to the Republican congressional delegation as incompetent, they were not. I served with two of them, Robert Hale of Portland and Cliff McIntire.

DN: They were dull and duller.

FC: They might have been that. They were not incompetent, they were, Robert Hale was personally a very bright and scholarly man, and Clifford McIntire certainly knew the potato economy of Aroostook and agriculture generally. I think, however, that in their political reaching out they were of the old school which did not at that time believe there was much necessity to do that.

DN: When I said incompetent, I had in mind Charlie Nelson, not

FC: He himself was a brilliant man in his prime, it's just, it was sort of a tragedy that he ended up that way, but he was just a bright rising star for many years.

EG: Okay, so, as you were saying with the '52 election of Eisenhower, a lot of old school Democrats were flushed out is what I believe you're saying?

DN: No, withdrew.

EG: Withdrew. So, the combination of that I assume, I'd like to know that, and an influx of people such as yourselves working for the Democratic campaign, do you think that is what helped, was significant in the campaign, you and Muskie working on the campaign?

FC: You say, was there an influx of ...?

EG: Well, do you think that, yes, I'm sort of, yes, I'm asking the influx and ...?

FC: Well, I, yes, I can begin to answer it with, we had, I think we were very moved by Adlai Stevenson who had run in 1952 and was to run in 1956 and we, I think some of us knew him and he did come to Maine during one of our campaigns. And there was a new spirit abroad that influenced a lot of people not only in Maine but in other states as well. Now this doesn't mean that there were hordes of young people eager to become politically active. But we did find as we

went around, we just gradually found people, like in Lewiston there was Tom Delahanty who was then a young lawyer in Waterville. There was Richard Dubord who was a bright young lawyer, the son of Harold Dubord, a veteran leader of the Democratic Party, an outstanding politician, Dick McMahon of Waterville, and we could name quite a number of others. And this group increased over the years and some of them later ran for office and some of them of course held important posts in the Muskie administrations.

DN: You have to be careful in looking at the Democratic Party in 1954 not to view it as new people sweeping out the old. And that's one of the reasons I referred earlier to some of the leadership withdrawing, people who had held those senior posts and withdrew from the field, some of them before, starting in '52 really, and new people coming in. And there were, but there were a number of people who had been active in the party at the local level particularly. Rank and file workers, who held on in the very lean years and felt that the party was important for benefits to working people, farmers, factory workers, etc., and they stuck with it. And the group that really ran the 1954 campaign included the new and the old working in harmony. And that's one of the characteristics of the party in that campaign that needs to be remembered. I think that's one of the great contributions that Frank and Ed in particular made.

FC: Yeah, we have, Don and I have talked many times. We have cherished memories of the these old timers who were on the state committee or the county committees that we knew and worked with for awhile. And they were just, they were just very charming and they went back a long time. I, as you were talking, this would have interest for your Bates background. But I can remember talking with George Ramsdell who was a beloved professor at Bates in, well, the early part of this century I think, he probably died in the '40s. Oh, no, he died after we'd become active in politics because I know he would give me encouragement and he would talk about how he became a Democrat under the influence of William Jennings Bryan. So we had people like that who went back a long, long ways.

EG: Okay, could you tell me about Muskie's role in the campaign, his past experiences as state director of OPS, Democratic National Party and Stevenson-Kefauver campaign, and how that maybe helped him as a candidate for the '54 election?

FC: You're asking how these other jobs had helped him?

EG: How it helped him and also his role

FC: In the campaign itself?

EG: How his presence in the campaign, his presence as a candidate, helped the campaign or how the candidacy helped him.

FC: How his presence in the gubernatorial campaign?

EG: Right.

FC: Well, he began, we, well there's another story as to how we tried to get candidates and how

he didn't want to become, be the candidate for governor until no one else would and then he, then he became the candidate. And in the spring of the year he would make some talks and we had difficulty getting very many people together. A typical evening might be in Winthrop or some other small town with maybe eight or ten people. Sometimes maybe fewer and, but as time went on, I remember April he celebrated his 40th anniversary by speaking at a Gray meeting and labeled himself a young middle aged man. Then, that was a pretty good meeting as I remember. Then as time went on he would talk about state issues, economic issues pretty largely. I remember I would derive information from reports of the Federal Reserve Bank in Boston and work up little speeches on fisheries and other things which he would give. But the, where he really caught on was, and this I don't know from personal experience, only from reading what a newspaper reporter, Peter Damborg, has written. He went to Rangeley at a meeting in the, what was that, probably in July. And he sort of, he began what proved to be a lifelong habit of throwing away written script and he was talking, at this point he'd just seen his father in Rumford. And he talked about what a great country it was, his father a tailor coming over to this country and how he had been able to get an education and was able to really join the mainstream of American life. And Damborg wrote that as he carried on in this theme, everybody in the room just became riveted to him. And this was probably, you can assume, a pretty Republican group of sportsmen, male and, you know, hunters and fishermen. But they were enraptured by it, and at this point or thereabouts he found his voice and became the superb stump orator that he ultimately was reputed, well reputed to be.

So as he went around, he could feel support that I couldn't, working on organization, and I don't know to what extent Don could sense it. But he would sense it because he'd have Republicans come up time and time again and he would have a Republican group going public for him. So he just felt something was in the wind and I think his final victory was less of a surprise to him than it was to me. So he was very important. We did have a platform and we were reaching out to independents and we were organizing. Don was working with town committees, county committees, we tried to get candidates to run for the legislature, but his own magnetism as he developed as a campaigner certainly played a very large part.

DN: That campaign was intended as a building year. I don't think any one of us expected at the beginning that we would win any of the offices. And it really was a combination of the latent unrest over the state of state government and Ed's ability to come across as a believable and comfortable alternative and as someone who could stir the emotions, as Frank indicated, on occasion. Although I suspect we would have to admit that we sat through some dreadfully dull repetitive speeches on that campaign trip, because Ed felt very strongly that the role of a political leader was to provide education on the issues. And he laid out those lessons in homely simplicity but it wasn't demagoguery and it wasn't exciting much of the time. It was when he tapped into his emotional ties to his family and to the state that he really moved his audience. The most compelling speaker much of the time in that campaign was Paul Fullam, our candidate for the U.S. Senate, who was very eloquent and moved people. The two of them were a contrast; Ed in the long run had the greater capacity for growth and showed signs of it starting in that campaign.

EG: I've read a lot of the scrapbooks, and basically everywhere I read there's a quote from Muskie saying something about needing a two party system, two party politics in Maine, and it

seemed to have a been very, very, big point of Muskie's campaign.

DN: The most backward economically downtrodden parts of the state are the most Republican.

FC: And he would begin many a speech by, when he was a representative in the state legislature, going in and looking through materials on ways and bridges and he was describing how life was under a one party system with no choice. And so that was a theme, that was an opportunistic theme which we seized and which the Republicans in the future have tried to seize as the Democrats for a time have been in such a great majority. But it's a legitimate theme and he did play it very well.

EG: Could you give me some logistics of the campaign? When the prime campaigning months were and how often, how much time towards the campaign did Muskie spend, like, on a weekly basis?

FC: Spend on what?

EG: On campaigning?

FC: How much time?

EG: Yes, like on a weekly, you know, five days a week, six days a week, just, how much of his life he put toward campaigning during the prime ...?

FC: This is a strange question because the answer is obviously all of it.

EG: All of it.

FC: A hundred and ten percent. That is, the days began early and lasted until well after midnight many times. There was nothing, he was not practicing law at this time. Maybe he would have to handle the affairs of a client that couldn't be postponed but, and this was true of us also, I think.

DN: The framework that you have to think about is, the state convention was in late March. And as I recall the filing date for nomination papers was around the 20th of April and then the primary was in mid-June and the election was in the second week of September. So, unlike present elections where the beginning of the timetable is about the same, convention in the spring, primary in the spring. But the general election doesn't come until November, two months later, highly compressed and compressed in a period when traditionally Maine people are enjoying the short summer and dealing with the tourist trade. And so between March, late March and mid-April Ed and Frank were heavily involved in recruiting candidates, first for those major offices and then for the House and Senate seats, and county seats at the state level. Then making sure that people got out and voted in the primary, particularly in those areas where you needed write in candidates to be nominated for the legislative seats and making sure you had enough voters coming out to make a good showing when the tallies came up after the primary. And then immediately after the primary, to start the campaigning to get the candidates known.

And I think the other thing to think about in terms of Ed's campaign and generally the candidates' was the media campaign. That was the first campaign in Maine where we had television, but we had only four stations at the time, Channel 6 in Portland, Channel 5 I think it was in Bangor, Channel 8, Mt. Washington, and a channel up in Aroostook county, Presque Isle.

FC: What was WLAM?

DN: WLAM was a UHF station and I don't think we used it much at all because it didn't have much coverage and we didn't have much money. And so we had to, and as a practical matter, it was black and white television, you did not have video tapes in those days, so you literally had to have live television. We did have audio tapes, not the cassettes but reel tapes. And radio was the real means of media communication so we devised first a plan to use television at the beginning of the campaign to introduce the major candidates, and then at the end of the campaign to reinforce it, and to use radio as the means, telecommunications means of getting across the issues messages. And there we bought three weeks of time, Monday through Friday, on stations in the three weeks before the election with five minutes in the morning, five minutes at midday and five minutes in the evening.

And each of the candidates had five programs recorded for, that is the congressional and senatorial and gubernatorial candidates, had programs recorded for the morning audience, one for the midday, or a series of five for the morning, five for the midday and five for the early evening, and those were carried in rotation over that three week period. And the rest of the time was taken up with going around to the small meetings, going before the service clubs, gathering the faithful Democrats and going to grange halls, with a particular emphasis on areas that Democrats had not tended to go to in the past.

EG: Speaking of finances, money that financed the campaign, I've read in many places that the Democratic Party had only eighteen thousand dollars. And I actually read somewhere that they had only spent fifteen thousand of that. I don't know how accurate that is, but I was just wondering if you would talk about what sorts of people contributed to the campaign and how the, whether the Democratic National Party contributed to the campaign at all, and how the money was divided among the five candidates?

FC: I'll begin. Eighteen thousand is the figure that we've always endorsed. Probably it was a little more but the money that came through our office, and we were, the state, I was chairman of the state committee at the time and we handled the finances for all of the candidates and also allocated the money. And I'm quite sure that we spent all of the money we received. And we had to, we even had to finance a television program after the election because Paul Fullam insisted on going on and making a response to a late, last minute charge by Senator Smith and we felt he was entitled to do that so we raised it.

The money came, a lot of it was small contributions from the state. Labor gave us some, I think the Democratic National Committee must have given us some money but it would be in the neighborhood of two thousand dollars or something like that. There were no really big gifts. We didn't have, we had a few fairly well-to-do people in Maine who would give in the multiple hundreds.

In terms of allocating, oh, I should say that this money, although incredibly small by today's standards, went far. Our television budget was roughly two thousand dollars but we could buy fifteen minutes of prime time in the evening for one hundred dollars and couple it with a newspaper ad costing ten or fifteen dollars. So you'd have ten or fifteen or perhaps even twenty, well not as many as twenty, but fifteen television programs at prime time and not just little spot ads but substantial segments of time, it was pretty good. And people in those days were not jaundiced, they would listen to it. We did have problems of allocation. And I can remember once that we had to have a meeting at the Lafayette Hotel in Portland because Paul Fullam, our very good candidate for Senator, felt that we were preferring the governor, the gubernatorial candidate Muskie, in terms of money allocations. And we had a good session and I think it was straightened out and Professor Fullam I think felt he had been fairly treated. So that was perhaps the only thing I remember about troubles of allocation. Most of it was very, went very peaceably and I think effectively.

EG: Do you agree? Okay. In reference to television, I think Chris, I spoke with Chris about, there was a show set up introducing, I assume it was introducing the candidates? It was a half an hour in which I believe, Judge Coffin, you were, you presented the questions?

FC: I think I just spoke and introduced the candidates.

EG: Okay, that's what I wanted. When did this take place? Was this early on in the campaign?

DN: It was the Sunday after the primary.

EG: Okay.

DN: It was the following Sunday and it, Frank was the moderator and the first person to speak was Paul Fullam, and then the three congressional candidates, and then it finished with Ed Muskie. And the closing scene was a wide shot of the studio with the candidates and their spouses gathering and chatting on the set. And the whole object was to introduce the issues of the campaign and also to let voters in . . .

End of Side One

Side Two

DN: ... and also to let voters in Maine know that candidates did not, Democratic candidates did not have horns.

FC: At one point late in the campaign I seem to remember that we had all of our candidates on and we were followed, or, we followed the Republicans who had Burt Cross and Fred Scribner, others, and then we came on directly after. When was that?

DN: That was late in the campaign, yeah, yeah, and that was a, they had a half hour and we had a half hour.

FC: And we felt that this really spotlighted the difference because the Republicans, they were fine people, like Fred Scribner was . . .

(Tape running but nothing recorded for short time.)

DN: ... that appearance of them was very stiff and accusatory.

FC: Yes. I was saying that Fred Scribner was a friend of mine but he was, he and Governor Cross and the other candidates on the Republican side were fairly stiff and remote and straight laced. And the Democrats were much more natural appearing and Muskie by this time had developed a very effective way of speaking and we just felt that the contrast was telling.

EG: In general, can you give me your perspectives on why the '54 campaign was significant? Throughout this whole interview you sort of, you've been giving me sort of an answer to that question, but if you could give me what you think are the most significant aspects of the '54 campaign that made it ...?

FC: Well, number one, we had ideas, we had substance. Number two, we were trying to reach out and we made, this was a vastly different pattern of politicking. We did not ignore the cities but we went into the countryside and went, as Don said, to groups that hadn't seen a Democrat for, since long before the Civil War. Number three, we had an excellent total top ticket. That is, we had three congressional candidates of whom we could be proud, a senatorial candidate who had the daunting task of taking on Senator Smith, but the evidence that he was very effective lay in the statistics. He reduced Senator Smith's majority from ninety thousand to forty thousand or fifty thousand. And then of course heading the list was Governor Muskie who proved to be a, one of the most attractive candidates in the country. And, so, ideas, reaching out. I should also say that Don's good work in organizing also was effective, although this did not reach its full fruition for several years, but it was a very good start.

DN: I think that, continuing on the positive side of the campaign, you had enthusiasm among rank and file Democrats and it was a positive enthusiasm rather than a negative attack on Republicans, and that was critical at that stage. You can get away with negative campaigning today . . .

FC: Again the, what we should add, as we've had panels in the Muskie Archives, and I can remember Mert Henry saying that we shouldn't overlook the contribution that the Republicans made because they took care of the negative campaign within their own party.

DN: That's right. In two ways, one was their tendency to shoot themselves in the foot. Their gubernatorial candidate had alienated a number of voters in his term of office by his style and his manner and some of the policy decisions, and in addition he had a rare capacity for saying the wrong thing. We had a hurricane not long before the election and it was fairly damaging to several communities, and Burt Cross went out, looked at it and came back and said, well, it's not as bad as I thought it would be.

FC: Or if you, said something like, nothing, no problem that you can't fix if you just get out and

have the will to do it. So he told the inhabitants of Washington County to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, but by that time their own bootstraps had eroded pretty heavily.

DN: And the other thing in the Republican Party is that many of the disaffected had not only decided to vote Democratic but also campaign openly. And the Republicans for Muskie group, led in part by Neil Bishop who was a quixotic character, a little rougher version of Ross Perot in some respects, but there were some very solid business leaders, Harry Umphrey I think was part of that from . . .

FC: John Toft, Mort Harris, big oil, Harris Oil Company.

DN: The Friends [Ike and Norris] in Newport, auto dealers, a number of them had known Ed Muskie when he was OPS director in the state and had come to respect him for his integrity and his skills in working with people. You had the positive parts of the campaign, and the negative side was the Republicans.

FC: I suppose too, in retrospect, this was, well, this is '54, I was going to say the September election would have helped but we didn't have a presidential in '54, so . . .

DN: It was mid-term election which, when you generally have a slide away from the party that won the majority in the last presidential race. But Maine was separated from the national race by that September election.

EG: I read, your job was to, part of your role was to set up, I mean, organization, more local organization. I read that the Democratic Party didn't even have a permanent state headquarters. How extensive was, or, did you carry out, the organization?

DN: Let me describe the party headquarters during that campaign. It was about one quarter the size of this room, it was a single room lent to us by Henry Benoit who was the owner of Benoit's store, which no longer exists. He had, the big Benoit's store was here in Portland and there was a branch in Lewiston and he owned the building and a couple of doors down Lisbon Street from the store and upstairs there was a small office at the end of the hall. And it was probably about six

FC: It was not near my office.

DN: No, it was down the street from your office.

FC: Ultimately we had a little room in my building, didn't we? In Dan Wellehan's building?

DN: No, I camped out a little bit there but then we went up on Main Street. But at that time this little space that looked out on Lisbon Street . . .

FC: Yes, I'm misremembering. I remember that room.

DN: And it was lent to us, we didn't have to pay rent. We had a small desk that had been in a

storage space in Henry's store that was probably at that point about sixty or seventy years old and breaking down and the top was worn, and one chair. And a local union painter had come in and painted the office and painted the name on the door, the Maine Democratic Party, on the door. And I remember during that campaign Ed Muskie and Dick McMahon, who was his campaign manager, coming to do some work on the campaign with me. Ed got the chair and Dick and I sat on newspaper piles because that's all we had for furniture. The party had not had a full time staff member and had pretty much operated out of wherever the state chair was located, and the treasurer. Those were the two, and the secretary of the state committee. And we did not have lists to begin with.

FC: I think no party had a permanent office, and we were the ones who first installed a permanent executive secretary. Don was that.

DN: And during that campaign, all of the money we got had to go for campaign purposes so we did not build up any kind of equipment for the office. I used a portable typewriter that I had, we did not have a secretary, excuse me, we did have a secretary later in the campaign. And everything literally was handled with manual typewriter and a copy, an old ditto machine making copies. The schedule was an eight and a half by eleven sheet of paper marked out, the joint schedule for all the candidates. And it was after the election that we turned to building up the office. We moved up onto Main Street and had a suite of three offices, a large room for Frank, oh, and ultimately we had four rooms. A large room that served as Frank's office and conference room and a smaller office for me and a very small cubicle for the secretary. And then we got an addressograph machine which was the precursor of today's computers with labels . . .

FC: We got that, I remember going down, I would go down at 7:00 in the morning to the Lewiston Trust Company and talk with the president of that company who was a self-made man, George Lane, who had begun as the janitor. He was a trustee of Bates at one point. But he had run for governor as a Democrat and he was very interested in what we were doing. He gave us the addressograph machine.

EG: Chris, is there anything you want to ask?

Chris Beam: Yeah, I just have a couple of questions. Are you wrapped up?

EG: I think so.

CB: I just wondered, Frank and Don, did the Republicans seem to realize that this Democratic Party now could be a threat? My impression has been before '54 that the Democratic party had been really not taken very seriously, for good reason, but was there a sense anywhere, or did you sense that the Republicans sensed that they might lose the gubernatorial election, that the other candidates are going to put up a stiffer challenge, that this party was starting to emerge as a political force in the state?

FC: You mean after the election or before?

CB: No, during the election. I mean, say between, during the campaign season between the

June primary and the election in September.

FC: I don't think the party, I don't think the candidates, I think what Ed Muskie felt on the hustings was he saw people react to him. That didn't reach the leaders of the Republican party. I think they were very surprised. And of course we didn't, it was not a big sweep. We didn't bring, with Ed Muskie we brought very, I don't know that our legislative forces increased by more than a handful.

DN: Yeah, I think they may have doubled, which is not saying very much in those days. No, the Republicans, the only thing the Republicans did in that campaign was to hire a campaign manager for the gubernatorial candidate Burt Cross. And amusingly enough, they hired Parker Hoy who was the son of the owner of WLAM and a very good friend of mine and he in fact had hired me as news editor at WLAM. He was a Bates graduate, by the way, later became a Democrat and served in the legislature as a Democrat. But the one gesture they made in that campaign to more modern campaigning if you will was to hire a campaign manager. But for the gubernatorial candidate, not for the party as a whole. And I think probably an indicator of how the Republicans were feeling came in a news, in a political column the Saturday before the election, in the Lewiston Journal, "Lal" Lemieux, "Lal" Lionel A. Lemieux, wrote in his political column that the Democratic movement which had threatened to become a tidal wave has turned out to be a mere ripple on the surface of the waters. And that was about what the Republicans felt.

FC: And what was Lemieux called from then on?

DN: Oh, from then until he died he was called Ripples [At the time of this interview Lionel Lemieux was indeed still living and subsequently we were able to interview him twice: see MOH# 155 and MOH# 162].

EG: I read somewhere that, in a newspaper article, that before, I think it was before the primaries, Burt Cross made a comment about Ed Muskie not being the most valuable candidate the Democratic party could have offered. And it seemed as if, Judge Coffin, you stated that you wished that the, you hoped that the Democratic candidates would stick to the issues and that they wouldn't do any, like, slinging in it. It seemed kind of a funny opportunity for you and I just wanted, I don't know if you remember that incident. You don't remember it?

FC: No.

EG: Okay.

FC: That is you think I should have res-, how should I have responded?

EG: No, no, I think it was a good opportunity to, it kind of made the Republican Party seem a bit petty because they were criticizing the Democratic candidate, while Muskie tended to speak more on the issues of, state issues.

DN: We had four great advantages in that campaign. One was the unrest among the voters and

a real feeling that something had to change. Second was the disarray, a combination of disarray and refusal to change on the part of the Republican Party and leadership. Third was the quality of the candidates who were uniquely qualified to run at the beginning of the modern telecommunications era. Ed Muskie was an absolute natural on television from the first program, uncanny ability to understand that you talked to the camera as if you were talking to one person, and one person only, and also a sense of timing that I've never seen anyone else beat. Ed was terrible on the stump in terms of sense of timing because he could go on and on and on and on. When he was on television he was focused and came right to the point at the end of the time. And the other candidates were very good, very natural. And the final advantage was that you had people, candidates, who were really committed to work together in the sense that they were doing something for the benefit of the state. And we had not reached that point which is inevitable when candidates begin to think about their own careers and future and begin to look on the party as a mechanism for supporting them rather than the other way around. And that made an enormous difference in the way they campaigned, the way they focused their message, and the way they reacted under pressure.

CB: You mentioned that, of course there was the television show where Ed Muskie appeared with the other four candidates for national office, now, how often did the group of five appear in public? My sense is is what you said, Don, that there was a group effort, that they were running as a kind of ticket and supporting each other and supporting the Democratic party. Was this the case in smaller groups, or did they tend to kind of disperse and try to cover a larger territory?

DN: Well, the whole technique, our schedule was coordinated so that for any kind of a gathering, and some of those gatherings were small numbers of people, twenty-five, thirty people, you usually had three candidates, the gubernatorial candidate, senatorial candidate and the congressional candidate in that area. They would come together and speak. And sometimes they would tour together. Much of the time they toured separately, but they came together at strategic points.

EG: Just a little, Richard McMahon, was his, was Governor Muskie's campaign manager. Now, was he his individual manager or was he the manager of four of the five candidates?

FC: No, he was just Governor Muskie's manager.

EG: And did the other candidates each have their own manager, or did they share one?

FC: Not all. Did any?

DN: Just, Paul Fullam had a young economist at Colby College, Bobⁱ, I'm trying to remember his name. He was a young economist on the faculty who had been at Colby a few years after I was there. He was from Waterville. And he had a couple of other volunteers who worked in his campaign. The other candidates, the congressional candidates literally had no one. They had a few volunteers who might do some work for them but not on a regular basis, and the state committee office served effectively as their logistical support.

FC: But McMahon, who was Muskie's campaign manager, was really a great resource for the

whole effort. He was perhaps the savviest political mind that we had.

DN: He'd been instrumental in the development of winning campaigns in Waterville for the city council and the mayor's office, and was the treasurer of Waterville. Friar Tuck.

CB: Just one other question. The end result of the '54 election was that Ed Muskie was elected governor, but then the other four candidates did not win. Why do you think this is so? Why didn't any of the other candidates make a breakthrough? For example, in the congressional races you had Jim Oliver in district one, Tom Delahanty in district two, Ken Colbath in three, of course Paul Fullam was running up against what became a kind of icon of Maine politics, but I'm just wondering why did Muskie manage to get over that barrier?

DN: Partially it was the issues. From the voters' point of view the real major issue between the parties was state government, not the congressional.

FC: Moreover, they were probably closer to the governor, being closer having more information to hurl back at him if they disagreed with him. The congressmen were fairly remote and, Robert Hale was a distinguished fellow, a distinguished Maine family, and he had served a long time. It would take quite an effort to upseat him, although they made great strides. In the second district Charlie Nelson at this point was still riding pretty high and was difficult to overthrow. And in the third district Cliff McIntire was in solid for a long time, it would, and we had this music store owner who was a wonderful man but he had a long way to go to get himself known in that northern part of the state, let alone to really win.

DN: And truth be known, Tom Delahanty was a most reluctant candidate in the second district and almost ran on the guarantee that he wouldn't be elected.

FC: That doesn't mean he didn't try.

CB: You mean, you brought...if he, if he weren't elected?

DN: He was willing to run to fill that place on the ticket and to contribute to Ed's campaign. If he had dreamed at the beginning that he might win, having made a good faith effort, he probably wouldn't have run. And his wife was very unhappy at the beginning. Toward the end she started to wish he would win.

CB: Okay.

End of Interview

ⁱBob Barlow