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Cohen, Ann oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

Interview with Ann Cohen by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee
Cohen, Ann

Interviewer
L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date
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Place
Lewiston, Maine

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Biographical Note

Ann Cohen was born in Old Town, Maine, on November 23, 1944. Her mother, Eunice M. Cushing, was a nurse, and her father, Frank S. Cushing, worked for the Army. Because of her father's occupation, Cohen's family moved around New England. She went to college at the University of Maine at Orono and then got her master's degree at the University of Southern Maine and a second master's at Clarion University of Pennsylvania in the field of Library Science. Cohen got to know Edmund Muskie when she was an intern in Washington and observed him in the Senate. At the time of this interview, Cohen was a high school history teacher in Bath, Maine. For many years she was a participating teacher in the Muskie Scholars Program at Bates College.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: family and educational background; connection to Edmund Muskie; recollections of being an intern in Washington, D.C.; and the Muskie Scholars Program.

Indexed Names

Babbidge, Chris
Beam, Chris
Biden, Joseph K.
Broder, David
Burns, Fern (Campbell)
Carignan, Jim
Carter, Jimmy, 1924-
Clinton, Bill, 1946-
Cohen, Ann
Collins, Susan, 1952-
Cory, Gayle
Davis, Gerald M.
Greer, Cora
Johnson, Lyndon B. (Lyndon Baines), 1908-1973
Kennedy, Edward Moore, 1932-
Kennedy, Robert F., 1925-1968
Mawhinney, Eugene
Muir, Peggy
Muskie, Edmund S., 1914-1996
Muskie, Jane Gray
Muskie, Stephen O.
Nicoll, Don
Pitts, Virginia
Roosevelt, Franklin D. (Franklin Delano), 1882-1945
Scalia, Antonin
Schiavo, Terry
Smith, Margaret Chase, 1897-1995
Snowe, Olympia J. (Olympia Jean), 1947-
Stockford, Chip

Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Ann Cohen at the Muskie Archives at Bates College on March 22nd, the year 2005, and this is an interview for the Muskie Oral History Project, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could you start just by giving me your full name?

Ann Cohen: Ann, A-N-N, Cohen, C-O-H-E-N.

AL: And your maiden name?

AC: And my maiden name is Cushing, C-U-S-H-I-N-G.

AL: And could you give me your date and place of birth?

AC: I was born in Old Town, Maine, November 23rd, 1944.

AL: And did you grow up in that area?

AC: Actually, for a very brief time, and then my father met my mother, she was a nurse and he was in the Army, and they met one another, and I know that when I was a baby I did live with my mom with her family in Old Town. But after the war, my father was still in the Army Air Force, and we lived in New York, and then we came back to Maine and we lived in Cliff Island, Cape Elizabeth, we lived in Round Pond, Maine, and we lived in Mt. Vernon, Maine. We lived in Augusta, Maine, and I'm a Cony High School graduate and a graduate of UMO, and got my masters at USM, and a second masters at Clarion University of Pennsylvania.

AL: And were those master's degrees in history?

AC: The first was a master's in library science, from Clarion, and the second was a masters in New England and American studies at USM.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

AC: Frank S. Cushing, and Eunice M. Cushing.

AL: And growing up around several parts of Maine, what was your sense of their involvement in the communities that you lived in, or their political activities? Were they aware or active?

AC: Active in that they might have run for office or something like that, no, but active in that they were very involved in the community and in the workplace. I think early on my politics came from my grandmother. And my grandmother married a man who was from New York City, and during his childhood my father lived in New York City, meaning that he was a child of the Depression. And I was raised on my grandmother's knee in her rocking chair in Cliff Island, Maine, and she would sing me songs about East Side, West Side, she would sing songs about New York, and she would tell me the story about this man whom she considered fairly close to God, at least sitting on his right hand side, and that was FDR. FDR saved the country, saved the people. And so I became a nascent Democrat very early, and I'm talking pre toddler. In the family, mother and father, pretty preoccupied with making a living and raising a family of five. It was just clear that politics was not, was more of a luxury, that people who weren't working full time, raising a family, they got involved in politics. But, you know, we'd go to the town meetings and we'd be very involved in issues in the community. So their points of view, their perspectives, always came out. It seemed to me that they were less of a dyed-in-the-wool Democrat and more Independent in their thinking. It was much more the issue and the question at hand rather than the person.

AL: And so that probably set the stage for your interests later on.

AC: Absolutely.

AL: And what took you in the direction of a master's in library science?

AC: Well, that was interesting. When I first knew that I wanted to work in library science, I'd already done a lot of research and I loved, I was a historical researcher at heart. And I thought, well the one way to do, be involved with education, and my children, four, were in the educational process at the time, was to get a library science degree, and then I could do what I really loved to do which was historical reference work and that sort of thing. At the time, Maine did not offer a degree. Clarion University at Pennsylvania did. There was one other teacher with me in that class, we graduated in 1988, and that teacher and I discovered that you had to, if you wanted to be a librarian in the state of Maine, number one you needed to be a certified teacher. My degree was in history, and a minor in French. So I went through the degree program for a master's in library science with an emphasis in the social studies, okay? After the first year of degree work, I very quickly decided that research was wonderful but the classroom was better, and I preferred to be a classroom teacher. I finished the degree because it was a perfect marriage between skills that you need in history and political science and those types of areas, and it served me very well with my own students, too. But my real love was the kids.

AL: And so how have you been involved politically over the years, from the time you were growing up?

AC: Right, I've done some volunteer work. When I teach, I've always conducted in the school, the League of Women Voters comes into the classrooms. We've done mock elections with the Secretary of State's office and the school, and I've run that. I think I've been involved in that I was an American Memory Library of Congress Fellow, I was a James Madison Fellow studying Constitution. Bringing it into my classroom with my students, we've done a lot of community work. I am much more interested in having the students understand their community and see how they can become involved in it, as part of National Honor Society advisor, you know, encouraging them in outreach to the community; so all kinds of facets. Now that I have stopped teaching full time, but still teaching and still volunteering in the community, I find that I'm starting to get interested in political activity, too. And who knows, maybe the school board next year. Really, there will be a vacancy coming up next year.

But I'm working on community history, working on the 100th celebration of the library in our town, volunteering, I've written curriculum to teach a course, still keep my hand in with AP U.S. history. I think I impact all the time. Went to the town meeting, you know, it's the grass roots kind of politics that interest me much, much more than, obviously what I'm seeing at the national level turns me off completely. But part of the Democratic town committee and that sort of thing, that interests me very much, and so I'll be going to the caucus and, you know, that sort of thing.

AL: Before we began the tape recording you had given me some insights on your observations of the Senate and how it functions today. Is that from an outsider's view looking in? Have you had a chance to be there in person and observe the Senate?

AC: We've gone a couple of times. I've gone, through the years, back to Washington. First with my children and, you know, meeting Fern Burns again, you know, taking them around to my haunts and all of that. Certainly when I was a Madison Fellow, that year we were there, we were not only in the Senate but in the Supreme Court having a one-to-one with Antonin Scalia, which was awesome, and observing the changes. And then the same with the Library of

Congress Fellowship, getting a real inside look. So I've been back several times.

AL: And what have you seen over the years, and the changes?

AC: Okay, aside from the physical changes of increased security and the inability to come and go, I had great latitude with the Senator. And security issues were far less than they are now. I suppose the Senate was kind of sleepy on that issue when I was there. So that I got to go in the back corridors and up into the nether regions, and all around the place from committee room to committee room and, you know, all over the Hill. I don't think the latitude would be there today, that's one thing. You feel this sense of tension and fear that was not there. The other was, the civility with which senators and their pages or their AAs or whatever, the way in which they treated one another, whether it was on the committee floor, on the subway, in the elevator, it didn't matter, you know, or on the floor itself.

Our first introduction as interns was sitting in the balcony of the House, and it's a pretty heady introduction. It was 1964, and LBJ's [Lyndon B. Johnson] Great Society speech, that was an amazing event. And you could see, you could see that there was a desire between all the parties assembled to really go forward and push for something progressive and optimistic. Now, as I think as I said before, the idea of having informed debate, civil discourse, trying to reach a compromise, seems to have really almost disappeared from the landscape there. And the debate now seems to be more of a brawl, and also seems to be more if you're not with us, you're agin' us and we're gonna get you, and I find it very disturbing. It's not at all, there have been many, many books written about the Senate in the fifties and sixties and seventies, and then how it has changed, and I tend to agree with most of them. It's not for the better, not at all, and I think Senator Muskie would be appalled, I'm sure, at what's happened.

AL: Did you ever have an opportunity to observe him in the Senate?

AC: Oh, many times, many, many times.

AL: Can you recollect those?

AC: Well, first of all, I need to tell you that I worked very closely with Chip [Stockford] and with Don Nicoll. And they gave me unlimited freedom, and almost a passport, if you like, all around Washington.

AL: When you say Chip, you mean Chip Stockford?

AC: Yes, I do, I'm sorry. And they were just fabulous. I was assigned to certain committees. One intern was permanently assigned to the governmental affairs, intergovernmental affairs committee. I was assigned to his office as such, right there with Fern Burns, actually, sitting next to me. And Gayle was the boss, that's for sure. And I did write many, many letters having to do with his position on the Vietnam War. So many times I would go to committee hearings of committees that he was on, or committee hearings that had to do with the war, sat in on conversations and sort of like press conferences and that kind of thing. I found that in the early sixties when I was there, or the mid sixties, sorry, there was a different tenor about Vietnam, and

I do think that Muskie was very much a loyal Democrat, and he very definitely supported the president's point of view and policy. I think that he may have changed after I left as the war became more of a problem, more of a quagmire as they say.

I always found him to be very deliberative, and I think that that comes from his background in debate, you know. Careful, every thought was very well considered. I never saw him lose his temper, he was always, not above it but certainly very precise about anything he had to say, any question that he had to ask. I remember that I would also see him at informal moments when he was still working in his office, in his personal office, and I would bring in his ham sandwich and bean soup from the Senate, and I would go get it. There were lots of things where I would interact with him, and he was always just very, very, very businesslike, I would say, but also warm and friendly. And saw him right up until the time, bumped into a couple of times in the airport after he had left the Senate and his position as secretary of state, and saw him at Senator Margaret Chase Smith's funeral, you know, ceremony, if you like, under the tent outside of her archives. Were you there? No, okay. He was there with his wife Jane, and I know that he was not well but Jane said that no matter what he would be there, which was cool I thought. A tall man, very imposing, you know, but if you met Lyndon Johnson and then you met Senator Muskie, you could see where they wouldn't exactly be nose to nose, that Johnson would still have the height advantage, a bit.

I thought it was interesting that he seemed to be the glue that kind of pulled things together in the New England congressional delegation, Muskie did. It seemed like he, things pivoted in and out of that office; that was my perception. Although the congressional delegation I don't think had nearly the clout that, let's say, a southern delegation might. And they got together in sort of perfunctory manner. I called him the consummate Democrat, too. I think he was very much a Democrat in every sense of the word. I mean, I just think he was very liberal, he was open-minded. I just thoroughly enjoyed the time that I was there, and really admired him, respected him a great deal. I don't think there's too many senators, well, maybe a few, left from that pack. I know Senator Biden perhaps, maybe, perhaps coming close to that kind of mold of a senator. But when I see senators today, and I see the action on the floor, it's not nearly as engaging or interesting or, you know, does not certainly make you terribly proud to, you know, have these people representing you.

AL: Do you have a perspective on how they lost that, what some of the factors were?

AC: Well, I think, I think it happened over time gradually. It happened on the national level when the South, when the South began to become much more Republican in its outlook. But, and have to be careful about that because that's Republican in the old sense of the word. I mean, if you look at the definition of conservative, conservatism has been just sort of flopped on its head. I mean it's, it doesn't make any sense to people who were in the Senate at that time, okay? They are doing things that the Democrats would have done back in the sixties, so it's very complicated. I think the southern swing to the Republican Party had a great deal to do with that. I think some missteps on the part of two Democratic presidents, Jimmy Carter on the one hand, someone who's admirable and I respect him very much, but not really equipped as a true politician, I don't think, to work with the Hill. And with Clinton, a brilliant man who I still, I don't cringe when he talks. I cringe when our current president does, saying oh, that can't be the

man representing us. Clinton's missteps both professional and personal were really a disaster I think, for the party, and so you saw a real swing to Republican control.

And then the rise of the moral majority and the Christian conservative right with their agenda, and I think now what you see in the Senate is a great deal of pandering to that element, and I think also you see that element just in the Terri Schiavo case. Really, you know, turning the role of the legislative branch, turning it inside out and upside down, and it just makes no sense whatsoever. And distressing to see that even the Maine delegation, cooler heads prevailed in some cases but not in all, and some actually voting in favor of it, it was quite remarkable. I think Senator Muskie would have delivered something on the floor of the Senate saying this is not the proper role and, you know, talking about the Constitution and talking about state's rights and that sort of thing.

AL: It's interesting just as a footnote to that, that the poll they took of just average American people, over seventy percent said that this discussion had no place.

AC: This is not the role of this branch, correct. And I think, I think you're going to find, though, that the neoconservative bent is probably going to, or possibly, I'll use that word, possibly going to see, just see itself happening in the Supreme Court as well in the duration of this administration, which is a frightening thought for a Democrat, or a liberal or whatever you want to call us. I think Muskie would be rolling over in his grave, I truly do. One of my finest memories of him is when he was alive he would come and have lunch with Muskie scholars every summer, and I thought that he was just brilliant. I mean, we had other senators, we've had Mitchell here, and we've had Cohen here, and they all sat down to a lunch upstairs with the students as well. It wasn't nearly as interesting as Muskie's, I didn't think, you know. He was I think thoroughly enjoying himself, and I think he gave an insight to the Senate, too, to the kids. And they asked great questions and he was really honest about everything, you know, from the campaign of '72 to Vietnam to whatever.

AL: And how did you get involved with that program?

AC: With the Muskie summer scholars? Well, you'll have to ask Jim Carignan, because he won't tell me. He won't tell me why he asked me.

AL: Oh, so he sort of chose you?

AC: Yes, yes, and I do not know. Well, I don't know that he chose them, he offered them the opportunity and then they chose to say yea or nay. I'm not quite sure how my name bubbled to the surface, I really don't know.

AL: I'm interviewing him in a couple weeks, so I'll nail him down.

AC: Okay, maybe you can find out. I mean, I'm really kind of interested, you know, I really am. And I just wrote him a thank you letter because I am writing, I've written it, I've written a curriculum for a course that I'm going to teach at St. Joseph's College this summer, teaching history teachers how to make history far more interesting and far more exciting, and I know that

his letter of recommendation certainly, you know, did a lot to persuade them that I was the one to teach the course. But I really don't know, I really don't know. I just feel very, very fortunate.

The first group of teachers included Cora Greer, who has retired but she teaches at U Maine in Machias; Peggy Muir, who is at Freeport High School; Chris Babbidge, who's at Kennebunk and now is in the house, the state house; and Jerry [Gerald M.] Davis who's also in the house of representatives, and those two had a burning desire right from the beginning of the summer scholar's program, became very good friends, we all did, and they obviously were politicians, you know, out to get some elected office, and they've done quite well. And it's been interesting to see, it's been Chris Beam and Chris Babbidge and myself who have stayed with the program the longest, from the beginning. And it's been a joy, it's just awesome. I think it's everything and more that Muskie would have envisioned, and I know that I keep in touch with some of the graduates, and they have indeed gone into elected office in their respective states, not just in Maine. And I think it's a great opportunity, so however it happened, I'm glad it happened to me.

AL: You mentioned earlier Gayle Cory. Tell me what you remember about her.

AC: Yes, Gayle. I remember Gayle being always, if I say always in control that creates a picture that would be unfair. Beautiful woman, very attractive, very together kind of woman. But she knew everybody, or it seemed that way to me. Virginia Pitt also was someone that many times when I'd be writing a response to a constituent letter about Vietnam, there'd be a veterans issue that would come up, and I would go to Virginia. And between Virginia and Gayle, I think they knew everyone who counted anywhere in the whole city and the District and the system. They had their fingers on everything, and I found her to be, I found Gayle to be charming and definitely a true professional. She was amazing.

AL: They were both from Maine, too.

AC: Yes, yeah, and that interested me. I never found out too much about the different offices here in Maine, but they certainly seemed to have their finger on the pulse of what was happening at home. And I always felt that between the two of them, in particular, they were great representatives for the senator whenever they interacted with anybody, whether it was in the Washington office or with a constituent directly, or on the phone to that maze of bureaucracy. And they could always get an answer, I was so impressed, you know. Gayle also was the recep-, in the reception area, too, so that she was the first face that anyone would see, and I found her to be very, you know, gracious and hospitable with people, and she was always ushering in one or another someone coming to visit, you know, to pay their respects. I just found her to be a real savvy, savvy woman, very much so. I think between Gayle and Virginia, and Chip and Don, he had himself quite a team. I mean, I think he really, really truly did. I think they knew what he was about as a senator, what he believed in, and what was most important to him, and they embodied it in everything they did. So that was my impression.

AL: Unfortunately we missed the opportunity to interview Chip Stockford early in our project. Could you describe him for me? I know he was important and integral to Muskie's staff.

AC: I had more to do with Don, quite frankly. Chip always seemed to be, well I think I had

more to do with Don because when I wrote a letter I put it on the addressograph machine, and there would be Muskie's signature so it was very important, although my initials were there, it was very important that the wording was correct and that sort of thing, and he sort of was more of a mentor to me. Chip seemed very, very involved in, I guess, the day-to-day operations, and the politics of, you know, make sure the office ran right and, you know, kind of pulling all the strings together. I seem to have been under Don's wing more than his, so my impression of him was a lot of busy, busy, a very busy person. And Don was a little bit more, not that he wasn't busy and didn't have his finger in every pie, but more, I don't know, relaxed is the wrong word. I'm not sure what to say. Just a little more even, you know, a little less frenetic. So I'm afraid I can't give you much insight into Chip.

AL: You mentioned Don being somewhat of a mentor. Is there anything that you carried with you later on that you felt you learned under his tutelage?

AC: Well, I see him all the time, you know, up here. Every summer, I see him all the time. I think that idea of, the idea that you can make a difference and that you need to be involved to make a difference, and whether you're involved in the classroom or you're involved out in the community, or if you actually run for elected office, that that's what really makes it all work. And as soon as you disconnect or detach from the process, both you and the process suffer. And so I would say I definitely got that from him. Also his, you know, his very professional attitude towards people, his ability, I talk far too much and he was much smarter than that. Of course, you must remember I was, you know, just a junior in college, not yet quite mature. But as I matured and, you know, had a life of my own, a career of my own, and seeing him and talking with him, it was, it continued to be a nice friendship, you know, a nice relationship. And I could call him up tomorrow if I wanted to, I'm sure, and ask him something, and he'd be as gracious and thoughtful as ever. But I think this idea of, now Muskie's idea would be, you got to get in there and get involved. Don would have a little more measured kind of way of putting that, you know, a little professorial perhaps. That would be my impression.

AL: What are some of the things that I haven't asked you about your interactions with Senator Muskie, or your perceptions or recollections over the years that you feel is important to have?

AC: Probably that, hmmm, since I've been in the summer scholars program and studying him more in depth, and then reading some of those letters I wrote and sent, oh my word, I was really sitting on the fence. And then knowing, well yes, you were, that was the careful place to be was on the fence. And then, you know, meeting him and listening to him talk about, I think one of the most important things when he had lunch one year with the scholars was, someone asked him about New Hampshire and, you know, asked him about crying, and [David S.] Broder's perception. And he kept saying what he had said in his video taped biography. His staff had urged him not to go to Manchester that day, and that he had not cried, but that it looked like he had cried, and it was probably one of the worst mistakes he'd ever made. And I thought, here's a man who, you know, I mean he really went very, very far in his career, a very distinguished career, and for him to say that to a group of students I thought was a very telling thing. You know, I shouldn't have done that, that was a mistake, you know. And I could see maybe another politician sort of skirting it a little bit more and not actually just coming out and forthrightly stating, you know, that was a mistake, I shouldn't have done that.

Let's see. I think seeing him with his family, because they invited us to their home, and I have some family pictures, for a cookout. And then living in Lyman, Maine and raising a family, as I was in southern Maine, and having the local newspaper out of Kennebunk come and do an article on our house and the fact that we were one of CMP's electricity conserving kind of family, we were on a program, and who would I see but Steve Muskie, and he was doing the photo shoot and, you know, doing the interview. And that was a hoot to talk with him about his dad, and of course now he was grown man, a professional and I was, you know, in my career as a mom at that time. And the fondness with which we, you know, talked about his dad. I think Muskie was almost larger than life in a way, in American politics. The idea that when you talk about, there is something about Maine senators. I was trying to figure out how much, you know, they turn to [Olympia] Snowe and they turn to [Susan] Collins and they say, "Well, you know, they're very much like [Margaret Chase] Smith, and they're very much like that and that, because of the gender." And I'm thinking, "Well, no, I think Maine senators tend to be a lot more like Muskie than they do," and I've often wondered why there hasn't been this major biography about him. It's really, really intrigued me, why not, by you know, someone who really knows the Senate well at that time.

I just remember him as, you know, being the epitome of someone that you would measure another senator by, I suppose. So, but I think, I found it interesting that he would continue to state that the job he really liked the most was being governor of Maine. And I was really too young, and we lived in New York at the time, to really get the full impact of that, but it must have been revolutionary. And, the concept that he liked to be in charge and that he liked to make these decisions. So that brief time as secretary of state probably really appealed to him; more of an executive kind of position rather than legislative. What else?

I guess he gave me the only opportunity that, I've talked to a lot interns. His name would open doors and it was kind of fun to kind of be in the shadow of the name at times. He was extremely generous. I mean, I think he must have said to Don Nicoll, just carte blanche, you know, whatever she wants to do. And I would do research all around Washington and travel all over. It's, I mean, generosity supreme. And his name would definitely open doors. All you had to say is, the man had great stature, I guess I should say that. And one of my fondest memories is bringing his lunch to him one day, setting it on the desk, and him just sort of motioning to me to look out the window. And at that time, people could come and park right next to the office building where his window overlooked the park, and then the Capital off to the left. And, now it's all barricaded, you can't, no one parks there.

And up comes this wonderful Cadillac, don't ask me what kind, I'm not good with that, Cadillac, and in it are the two most gorgeous looking to me, a young woman at that time, men and a big fluffy sheepdog. It was the Kennedy brothers, Teddy and Bobby. Oh, my gosh, omigosh, omigosh. You have no idea. And he's just looking, you know, like, here, take a look, you know, and I thought, wow. I felt like this was certainly I was in the presence of kings, gods, princes, whatever you want to say, you know, it was really amazing. So it was a great way to spend my semester. And then I stayed on through the summer, and yet I do remember writing back to Dr. [Eugene] Mawhinney, remember, did you get a chance to interview him?

I remember writing back to him and saying, well, this is just wonderful but I need to tell you, you have to just get rid of those textbooks, it doesn't work like that. And that was not denigrating the way it did work, or the textbooks either, but just trying to tell him there was so much more to this than what you get in the textbook, you know, it's the hands on, the day-to-day personal contact. And so I'm really grateful to him for that, because I got to see all the stuff that goes on behind the scenes, you know, and it's so much more than the dry pages of a textbook. And so, if we could have afforded it, it would have been great to have the whole class come down and intern for the year, you know, or whatever. It was a great time, really, and interesting connection with him right along, which I found amazing. Certainly not planned, I'm sure.

AL: Thank you very much, Ann.

AC: You're welcome.

End of Interview