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Comee, Edgar A. oral history interview

Jeremy Robitaille

Interview with Edgar A. Comee by Jeremy Robitaille

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee
Comee, Edgar A.

Interviewer
Robitaille, Jeremy

Date
May 30, 2001

Place
Brunswick, Maine

ID Number
MOH 273

Biographical Note

Edgar Atherton Comee was born on April 2, 1917 in Brunswick, Maine. His parents were from the Saugus, Massachusetts area. His father was the chief engineer and later the general manager of Pejepscot Paper Company. His mother was a homemaker. Edgar was the oldest of three. His father was a Universalist and both of his parents were staunch Republicans. He attended Bath Street School and Brunswick High School where he graduated in 1934. He then attended Tufts University. After graduating he taught for one year in Warren, Maine and for one year in Brunswick, Maine. He was in the Naval Reserve from May 26, 1941 until 1945. He worked for the Portland Press Herald. He was then a Captain in the Naval Reserve from 1950-1953 when he served in Korea. In 1959 he received a fellowship to serve under Charles de Gaulle in the new government in France. He was an editorial writer from 1960-1961. In 1961, he worked in the State Department in Washington. He worked in the Office of News, the Bureau of Public Affairs, and as press liaison for visiting heads of state.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Maine Legislature 1946-1949; meeting Muskie; 1954 Maine gubernatorial campaign; Muskie's term as governor; Muskie's 1969-1972 presidential campaign; Muskie's 1976 Senate campaign; *Manchester Union Leader* incident; foreign relations; Senate

legislative work; Democratic Party in Maine; media; Muskie as a Catholic; the Great Depression making Comee a Democrat; Brunswick Emergency Relief Association a forerunner of the United Way; class in Brunswick; race in Brunswick; minesweeping in Jacksonville, Florida; “Lal” Lemieux; John Gould; television; entertainment vs. information; term limits as productive; government financing of political campaigns; and the Nieman Foundation at Harvard.

Indexed Names

Lindley Lopez, Nicolas
Lovejoy, Elijah P. (Elijah Parish), 1802-1837
Lowery, Charles "Charlie"
McKernan, John
Muskie, Edmund S., 1914-1996
Nicoll, Don
Nixon, Richard M. (Richard Milhous), 1913-1994
Nute, Floyd
Payne, Fred
Pendexter, Faunce
Penley, Ed
Roosevelt, Franklin D. (Franklin Delano), 1882-1945
Rusk, Dean, 1909-1994
Sargent, Dwight
Senghor, Leopold Sedar
Talberth, Edward D.
Terry, Fernando Belaunde
Ugarteche, Manuel Prado
Williams, Maurice

Transcript

Jeremy Robitaille: The date is May 30th, 2001. We're at the home of Edgar Comee at 161 Merepoint Road in Brunswick, Maine. Interviewing is Jeremy Robitaille. And Ed, if you could start out, would you please state your full name and spell it?

Edgar Comee: First name is Edgar, E-D-G-A-R, middle initial A for Atherton, which is A-T-H-E-R-T-O-N, Comee, C-O-M-E-E. M as in Mary, two E's.

JR: Thanks, and what was your date and place of birth?

EC: Brunswick, Maine, April 2nd, 1917. But I think my mother and father fudged the date. My mother and the doctor fudged the date so that I wouldn't be a April fool, which has nothing to do with the case, but.

JR: And what were your parents' names?

EC: My father was Edgar Randolph Comee, and my mother was Constance Atherton Comee.

JR: And where was your father from originally?

EC: Originally from Massachusetts, Somerville, Cliftondale, which I think was an area of Saugus.

JR: And how about your mother?

EC: Same thing, Saugus, Massachusetts.

JR: So how did they end up coming up to Brunswick?

EC: He had just graduated from Tufts as a civil engineer, and interviewed for a job at the Pejepscot Paper Company and very short-, and was hired immediately in a very short period as chief engineer. And when he retired in his sixties he was general manager of Pejepscot Paper Company, which is now occupied by a restaurant and offices, other things.

JR: And how about your mother, what did she do?

EC: What did she do?

JR: Yeah.

EC: She was a homemaker, as they say.

JR: And how many children were you?

EC: Two, three, I'm sorry, I have two sisters.

JR: And where were you, were you the youngest or in the middle?

EC: I am the oldest.

JR: Okay, great. And what can you tell me about your family's, like, religious beliefs?

EC: What's my family's beliefs?

JR: Like your parents belief?

EC: Church was, my father attended the Universalist Church, which is about as liberal as you can get and still be a Protestant. And some of it rubbed off on me but not much. You might call me, I'm fishing for a word, but I essentially had very little religious upbringing. I'm a little curious about these questions, but I don't mind answering them. But I don't know about their relevance.

JR: We're building up, we're building up.

EC: Go ahead.

JR: How about politically, how were your parents?

EC: They were Republicans. One hundred percent. My father considered, somewhat jesting, that Franklin Roosevelt was not much better than Adolf Hitler, and my mother would say,

"Randolph, don't be ridiculous." But wasn't that bad. He did not approve when he found out that I had voted for Roosevelt.

JR: Okay -

EC: So I was a child of the Depression, and the Depression turned me into a Democrat very quickly.

JR: Really, how so?

EC: Here was a president who was willing to act, take some steps rather than assume that the system was going to correct itself. President Hoover, pretty good man but not ready for the times, speaking of Hoover that is.

JR: And were your parents very active in the community, like politically speaking?

EC: My father was active in a lot of public service, had jobs, worked around Brunswick, he was on the school board one time, he was chairman of the planning board. He served for many years on the sewer district, and was a chairman; he was into that, he was once, I guess the Brunswick Chamber of Commerce had a "Man of the year" award which was given to him, yes. My mother took no part in this. As I said, she was a homemaker.

JR: What can you -?

EC: She was a very amusing woman, but she didn't get into (*unintelligible word*).

JR: You mentioned that you grew up in the Depression. What recollections do you have of Brunswick growing up, like during the Depression, or also just like -?

EC: Well, my father was chairman, treasurer rather, and worked with (*unintelligible word*) the Brunswick Emergency Relief Association, and I suppose that's a forerunner of United Way. But, I can remember people coming to the house, poor, some of the poor people in Brunswick, to receive donations, to get money from him I presume.

Other than that I, as a school child I was conscious that many of my school buddies were in poverty or next to it, but we got along very well. There was no class distinctions among the kids, which is common in children I think, just as it was then with us. The so-called landing, or what is now Water Street, was then Water Street, down near the river was considered the poor area of town. And now and then you heard the phrase 'landing bums' from people, from kids who should have known better than to use it.

Also there was a, sort of a dichotomy between the French Canadian population of Brunswick which was centered on the Cabot Textile Mill. And there were some to a lesser extent on the paper mill, and the Anglo end of the town, of which the college would be the tip of the iceberg sort of people there. But again, with my acquaintances, some of my best playmates, buddies, were French Canadian kids. (*Unintelligible word*) I learned to swear in French before I learned

in English. But there was some, because Maine is sort of regarded as less high than the rest of the country during prosperous times, it therefore has less distance to fall when the bad times come. But, go ahead, ask me another question.

JR: You were talking about like ethnic tensions like between Franco Americans and Anglos.

EC: Well, they would speak of Frenchtown, which was an area fairly close to the river, and I lived, my home was on the edge of it, which is why I got to know so many French kids. My best friend was a guy named Jacques (*name*), or (*name*) as they call it, as some call it. But I don't know that I would call it tension. We never fought or ever did any gang stuff. It was pretty democratic, liberally democratic way of getting along. *Modus vivendi*, in Latin, it worked.

JR: Were the Franco Americans predominantly the ones who worked in the mills?

EC: Yes, there was, rather late in the game a Dr. Dionne came to Brunswick. I don't know whether he came from Canada or not, but he became the doctor for the French Canadian element. At that time there weren't more than three or four doctors in the whole community. I forget what your question was that led me to make that -

JR: Oh, I was just asking if the Franco Americans were predominantly the ones who worked in the mills.

EC: Yeah, yes, or it was LaBelle's candy store and ice cream parlor; Louis LeClair and Gervais, which was a clothing store. There were some special people that did this, but not many. And of course there was a level of French Canadian management, the foremen and whatnot who lived better than the people in the tenements. There were tenements owned by the mill, which survive as historical artifacts of the mill.

JR: Okay, what recollections do you have of Brunswick community politics and like prominent figures, like people you remember?

EC: (*Unintelligible phrase*).

JR: Like local politics.

EC: Brunswick was run by selectmen at that time, when I was growing up. The town meeting was what you'd expect, very well attended. I don't remember to what extent the Franco element participated, but they were certainly free to. Although the town was run by I guess a (*unintelligible word*) Anglo element again. I don't want to make too much of that, but that can be a pejorative word, and that's not the way I mean it.

But the agenda for the annual town meeting was actually in fact established by the so-called committee of eight, which was presumably a representative body, I don't remember how they were appointed or by whom. But they would set the articles for the town meeting and the town would be presided, the meeting would be presided over by one Ed Weir, the attorney for the Maine Central Railroad, one time candidate for governor, so it was pretty much an establishment

operation. But Brunswick was always Democratic, reliably would vote Democratic in any election. Of course, the selectmen were not voted, were not elected in that manner, they were elected independently.

JR: Great. What can you tell me about Louis Labbe?

EC: Louis Labbe?

JR: Yeah.

EC: Nothing, because I don't identify -

JR: No? Okay, because I was told he was a political figure in the 1950s here in Brunswick.

EC: That could be. I was not here. There are plenty of Labbes around now, the big construction, heavy construction, Ray Labbe & Son, whatever, I know them well.

JR: Okay. Do you recall Harry Schulman?

EC: I certainly do.

JR: What can you tell me about him?

EC: He came out of Lewiston, I think.

JR: Really?

EC: He was Jewish, he was a cripple and he always walked with a heavy limp, and a very jovial, outgoing guy. And he was Brunswick correspondent for the *Portland Press Herald*, and later selectman, and a big wheel in the Brunswick Sewer District. A very public-spirited guy. Married a French Canadian woman. The works of the Brunswick Water District are named after Harry Schulman. He was a photographer, a correspondent, very fond of my father I might say. And everybody liked Harry, and everybody knew he was Jewish but there was no, there wasn't whatever on that score. He was a, I don't know how much education he had, but he was one of Brunswick's finest citizens, to sum it up. And I knew him very well, both as a Brunswick boy and as a colleague and a, I worked on the *Press Herald* (*unintelligible phrase*).

JR: How about Henry Benoit?

EC: Henry, well, you can get into an argument about how to pronounce it, he called it Henry Benoit, I knew him slightly, never well enough to call him Henry. He wasn't a Brunswick man, he came out of Biddeford but I'm not certain about that, he was the founder of the Benoit clothing, not really a chain although he had three or four stores around Maine. And he was certainly affluent. I know his daughter, Maria Henley, whose husband just died. But I have no sense of him as a man, or what contribution he may have made. I knew he was a fine, upstanding guy, very successful, progressive merchant. That's what I know about Henry Benoit.

JR: Okay. How about Charles Lowery?

EC: In Brunswick?

JR: Yeah, I was told he was an active Democrat, he and his wife. Perhaps not.

EC: I think, I don't remember that name. Again, I effectively left town after WWII and I was living in Portland and I lost touch with who's who in Brunswick.

JR: Okay, well now let's backtrack a little. We'll talk a little bit more about you. What can you tell me about your experience in the school?

EC: Say it again?

JR: What can you tell me about your experience in the school, like where did you go to elementary school?

EC: I began my education at the Bath Street School, now occupied by Bowdoin College, at the age of five. Graduated from Brunswick High School in the class of 1934. Went to Tufts, I wanted to get out of town, I might have gone to Bowdoin, but I wanted to leave town. My father was a Tufts graduate. What can I say about my education? It seems to have worked. Yes, but then I was also a teacher briefly for two years between, after I got out of college I taught for a year in Warren. Three student, three teachers, first year they had indoor plumbing, nine hundred dollar salary. Second year I taught in Brunswick for the munificent sum of, could it have been twenty-five hundred, I don't think it was that high. Only one year. In Warren I taught, having majored in English, I taught American history, world history, civics, problems of democracy, biology and free-hand drawing. I don't know what that tells you about me.

JR: Kind of a jack of all trades.

EC: Exactly.

JR: So what did you do after your teaching?

EC: I left Brunswick High School three or four weeks before school closed in order to go to the Navy school for Budding Hawks and I got me a commission as an ensign in the Naval Reserve, but strictly on my education. I had no training as a military officer, and that's what that summer school in the Boston Navy Yard was about. And in 1941 I went to join that school on the twenty-, I entered the service on the 26th of May, which was an anniversary just last Saturday, and never went back actually, or never worked as a civilian. They told us if we come to this summer school you can to back, get a job, but they changed their minds. They said, "Yes, you can go back, but we'll call you right back here," and so effectively I was on active duty in the Navy six months before Pearl Harbor.

JR: How long did you serve in the military?

EC: I served from the 26th of May 1941 to November something-or-other 1945.

JR: Oh, wow.

EC: I, mostly I was a captain of a mine-sweeper, and I did some other stuff but that's effectively what I did, was operate a mine-sweeper.

JR: And what is that exactly, I'm not sure, can you tell me about what it was?

EC: Well, a mine is an explosive device.

JR: Yeah, yeah, right, I know what a mine is, yeah.

EC: And a mine-sweeper is designed to either destroy it or eliminate it or neutralize it before it can damage other shipping. So, actually I was captain of three, one after the other, but that's what I did during WWII.

JR: Okay, and where did you do this, where were you?

EC: Well I, actually the first ship I was on was built in Maine, a little ninety-seven foot wooden ship built in South Bristol. And I was one of the captains at the time that we took it to Jacksonville, Florida. And the only mines that I ever encountered were laid by the Germans in the approaches to Jacksonville, Florida, the port of Jacksonville, and we found those mines the following day, on August 21st, 1942, blew them up. It can be nerve-wracking, I can tell you that. And that's the only active experience I had with mines. The second ship, I was part of a fleet that swept the approaches to the port of New York. And the third ship, well I mostly did escort. I was the defense ship of the sea- going ships, steel ships, escort, enemy submarine patrol in the Atlantic, and ended up in 1945 transferring it to the Soviet Union navy. That was that. That's more than you want to know of the military.

JR: No, no, this was all great. So after the service, where did you go from there?

EC: I joined the *Press Herald* as a reporter for the great sum of twenty-five dollars a week. And if you can believe it, the G.I. Bill of Rights bailed me out to some extent so that I got my, my real wage was forty dollars a week. And so I stayed with the, I think of myself as a journalist still, so I stayed with the *Press Herald* until 1950 when I was called back into the Navy by the Korean. I was in the Reserve, captain in the Reserve. I was called back into the Navy, sent to Buffalo, New York, so there was an interruption of my journalistic career. I had about three years of that. I came back, continued reporting, and became an editorial writer. In 1960 I left, I was chief editorial writer at that time. Editorial page director, whatever that means. So I left the newspaper business and went to work in Washington in the State Department, with a good deal of help from Senator Muskie's office, which really meant Don Nicoll.

JR: Right, yeah, tell me about that, like what exactly what were you going to be doing down in Washington?

EC: I was sent to the office of news, which is, was part of the Bureau of Public Affairs, and it was the office that had daily contact with the Washington press covering the State Department and foreign affairs. And every noon there was a briefing and a spokesman, a State Department spokesman at the time, or the assembled multitude of and I and others like me were helping in that respect. Answering the phone, and see whoever, whatever came over the transom in the way of a query we answered as best we could. I also during that, as part of that, got to be the press liaison. I worked as press liaison for visiting heads of state that would come to see President Kennedy. Then they'd take off on a trip around the country and I or others like me would go with them and sort of fending for them with the American press wherever they went.

JR: What heads of state do you remember -?

EC: Say it again?

JR: What heads of state, what people in particular do you remember interacting with?

EC: Well, the president [Prime Minister] of Sudan [General Ibrahim Abboud], I traveled all over the country with him. I had some dealings again with, we weren't handshake buddies, but I was one of the troops keeping the thing moving. The president of Peru [Manuel Prado Ugarteche, Ricardo Pio Perez Godoy, Fernando Belaunde Terry or Nicolas Lindley Lopez], the president of Senegal [Leopold Sedan Senghor]. I went to one of the, helped with one of (*unintelligible phrase*) the head of Indonesia [President Sukarno] who came to Washington, but not on a state visit, but. And we went (*unintelligible phrase*) Andrews Air Force Base when he came to see Kennedy about something.

JR: Great, and so you said that you had a lot of help from Muskie's office to get the job?

EC: I had a lot of help from Muskie's office, and I think it was Don Nicoll, I guess it was through their efforts that my application was, appeared at the Department of State and was pressed by Muskie's office. Actually, when I finally reported for duty the personnel officer let me know that he thought she'd been pressured by Muskie's office. I just shrugged my shoulders. I guess Don was on the phone now and then to the State Department to see how it was coming. For which I'm grateful. And I must say, I later thanked Senator Muskie in person for his help, and he said it was a pleasure to support someone who was qualified. Apparently at that time he was seeing, had been seeing, at that time you had to get Congressional, the custom was that Congressional approval for the appointment of a postmaster. So every time a postmaster of some little rinky-dink community, a postmastership came up, it would end up on Muskie's desk, whether they're qualified or not. And I judged that was why he said what he did to me. I took it as a compliment but I think -

JR: Great. What impressions or recollections do you have of Washington and the people there during your time with information?

EC: Very favorable one. I thought it was a good town, and I found the bureaucracy was capable of making mistakes, but I was also aware that the corporate world was capable of

making mistakes. I never have bought this notion that the government was any more inefficient than a lot, if not most, corporations. They all have things they want to hide, you know, that they (*unintelligible phrase*) or just plain mistakes they make. That is why I thought it was, in fact it was a privilege to work with the quality of people that I encountered. Not that they were perfect or ready for the celestial choir all of them, but I, as I said, I thought I was privileged to work with people of that caliber for a good cause. I wasn't in the State Department per se all the time, I worked at the AID, the Agency for International Development, which is a State Department branch if you will, foreign economic assistance, and that's where I've done most of my work in Washington. And they were under continuous assault by certain members of Congress, but it wasn't deserved. For a minute I'd forgotten, I've got adrift from the whatever your question was.

JR: Well, I was just asking about your recollections of Washington, and further, like, what specific people do you remember interacting with?

EC: Well, actually my career in Washington was being on the staff of the Secretary of the Treasury. When I was at AID I started to work for Henry Fowler who was then President Johnson's treasury secretary. I was recommended for the job so I went to work directly for a Cabinet officer. I saw the secretary of the treasury every day, I mean we didn't engage in colloquia all the time, but I sat in on the staff meetings so I, working at a Cabinet level is very instructive. And then when Nixon won in 1968 and I had to get scramble back into the Civil Service, I'd been a so-called Schedule C, a political appointment with the Secretary of the Treasury. And so I went back into AID, protected by, I would assume the service rule would be vulnerable to political administration changes in your job. But then working in the State Department, I saw quite a bit of Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Nothing intimate, but I was present in the days when he was active. But mostly when you worked down in the mines with the other peons, handling whatever came along. I don't know if that answers your question.

JR: Oh yeah, that was a pretty good job. So did you first meet Muskie while down in Washington?

EC: Oh, no, I first met him, and I should say that a lot of my knowledge of Ed Muskie is not secondhand, but indirect. I first shook his hand in the early fifties [*sic*] [forties] when he was Democratic floor leader in the Maine House. I'm sure he didn't know who the hell I was, a face in the crowd if you will, but that was my first glimpse of him. And I must say I was most impressed to see this guy who stood out, not in a highlighted way, but in a, I could say a home-made way, a common touch way. He had the common touch, and it showed that he was very, what's the word, he was a good speaker even then. And his voice, while low key and a little gravelly, would have told you that behind it all is a tightly coiled spring, which he could activate if he felt like it. So, and I must say the press at the time realized that the state was onto something with this guy. He was not your usual member of the legislature, not the usual politician. They knew he was a comer, the press did. I suspect some of that praise, some of that favorable view of him may have slopped over into what we wrote. That was my first brush, if you will, with the man.

JR: And then, but you did have direct contact with him while in Washington.

EC: Not often.

JR: No, okay.

EC: Not often. Actually almost none. I hate to bring it out because, but I will. The principal contact I had with him in Washington was social in that if it's a hot Washington summer. And Frank Hussey, Aroostook County potato expert who was then in the Department of Agriculture, Maury Williams, Maurice Williams who had been Muskie's finance officer when he was governor, and the senator and I formed a boating party. Maury Williams had a nice power boat which he kept on the (*unintelligible word*) River and, I don't know who put it together but we, there was a custom then of orchestra concerts on a place on the Potomac River and all of these Watergate events, the Watergate apartments and Watergate events took their name. And right on the riverbank they'd be playing, on the steps and whatever. And we would, took Maury Williams' boat to go and anchor off the Watergate to hear the concert.

But there was some liquor on board, courtesy of Frank Hussey who was very heavy handed with drink, and I must say that Ed Muskie certainly had his share. And on the way up to the concert, he took his, more interest than he should have in the clutch that operated the boat engine, and was duly reprimanded. He actually took out a gear and it could have ruined the engine, yet he didn't. Maury sort of remonstrated with him. But no further than when, we got to the Watergate, we cooked our steak, we had some more drinks, some more than others, and then Muskie announced that he was going to drive the ship back to where it belonged. But it was generally deemed he shouldn't do that, but he said, "Well I'm going to do it," and grabbed the key out of the ignition of the boat, put it in his pocket, said, well I don't remember what he said.

But to make a long story short, the three of us wrestled the junior senator from Maine to the deck and sat on him while we took the key away from him. And I, much the soberest of the lot, I took, I did a lot of, I was a marine type, I told you, I took this boat back to where it belonged. And seeing the junior senator from Maine retire to a corner of the cockpit, and pouted, didn't say a word, all the way back to the marina and walked ashore without a word to anybody. That's the end of it. That shows, I never held that against him, but it shows his humanity. He had his holes in his armor like all the rest of us. And whenever I saw him later, you know, which wasn't often, it never came up. I certainly never mentioned it; neither did he. And so that was (*unintelligible word*) I worked one end of town, he worked at the other, and my station wasn't such that I would normally have been in contact with him.

JR: But what were your impressions of his influence in Washington?

EC: Well, very considerable. I can't, I mean his record in Congress was very strong. And his environmental legislation remains monumental. He would have made a good president, I think.

I have another anecdote. Nothing to do with his character or anything else. But he had the summer place, either Ogunquit [***sic*** Kennebunk], I think it was Ogunquit or down that way, or York, whatever. And lo and behold, somebody covering the press camera TV had a picture of him going swimming in the ocean, which well displayed what had become an ample stomach.

And somebody, I don't know who, I can't remember who, wondered if the United States was ready for a pear shaped president. Nothing to do with the senator, that's just some smart guy in the press (*unintelligible phrase*).

JR: If you could wait just a second, I'm going to flip the tape over.

EC: Are you getting what you want?

JR: Oh yeah, oh yeah, definitely, this is exactly what we want, this is very much what we want.

End of Side A
Side B

JR: This is side two of the interview with Edgar Comee, and Ed, we were just talking about Muskie and you had a personal recollection of him. Do you have any more to add as far as anecdotes or impressions?

EC: He was very punster. The only example I remember was in a news conference in his office when he was governor and something came up about what a certain boat owner, a yacht owner, should do. I've lost contact, the context, but Muskie said, "I think he yacht to do it." That was typical Muskie pun. Absolutely irrelevant in terms of his politics. Of course, as I said at the beginning, most of my recollections of Ed Muskie were not in direct contact with him. I saw him again when he was running for senator the last time and he came through Brunswick. I was then doing a half time retirement job on the Brunswick, at the Brunswick paper, but that's the last time I saw him. I can't remember any other personal contacts.

We, on the editorial pages of the *Portland Press Herald* we said all kinds of good things about him. We did take him on, successfully, on an appointment of a municipal judge, which wasn't a very good appointment and probably was politically related to his political debts, if you will, or political friendships. I can't even remember the name of the man who he appointed to be a municipal judge in Portland, but on the editorial page we didn't think the guy was qualified. I didn't write the editorial, but that's what was done. And he backed off and appointed instead a man who I knew well and whose name I can't call up, who later became a judge and a towering figure on the Maine Supreme Court, so we were not displeased having done that to Governor Muskie. But by and large we approved his, what he was doing, what he stood for.

But we never could get the publisher of the Portland paper, who was then Jean Gannett Williams, daughter of the founder, Guy Gannett, to endorse Muskie. We tried but there was some, not all the editors on the paper agreed, but I think there was a consensus that Jean was not doing, and I was not present but someone, I was told by a participant who was there on a later occasion, he said, "Jean, why won't you endorse?" She had said she admired him, she enjoyed his company, (*unintelligible word*) and all that. "Jean, why won't you endorse Ed Muskie?" And Jean said, "Because he's a goddamn Democrat, that's why!" And that's just, that's an anecdote, too. She certainly approved of him. The paper has gotten, has changed. They're now fully, they did a lot of endorsing all up and down the scale, which I think is a good thing to do. That's,

doesn't tell you much about Ed Muskie.

JR: No, that's all right. I'm actually kind of interested in that. What do you thing attributes to that shift where like years ago they weren't endorsing candidates, and now they do a lot more of it. Do you have any -?

EC: I can't account for it. I certainly approve of it because it helps keep people informed, either tells them what not to think. But I just, a greater awareness that that's good journalism, but I can not account for it in local terms or any specifics nationally. I've been away from the game quite a while. I haven't practiced journalism since 1960. I left Portland in '60, went to Washington in '61.

JR: So how long were you in Washington, until?

EC: I left Washington in '74, I was there thirteen years.

JR: Okay, and what did you do after that?

EC: I retired early, and I have to say I didn't do anything very constructive for the public good. I had played the retirement game, a great deal of travel principally.

JR: Okay -

EC: Not so say I don't take an interest in politics per se, but I'm not active.

JR: If we could kind of talk a little bit about your time with the *Portland Press Herald*. Just sort of, were you principally a political writer, like editorial?

EC: No, I was all over the map. All over the map. Yeah, my boss at the time was Dwight Sargent, who knew Muskie better than I did, and really the leader in saying so much, so many good things about what he was doing. No, I was all over the map. And actually, when I was editorial page director, I was responsible for thirteen editorial pages a week. There was not much staff, one or two at the most staff, and in some cases not very good staff which is why I left the paper. I could see that they were going to, at that time management was not serious about running a serious editorial page. Again, I've lost the, I've drifted off the question you asked me.

JR: Oh, just -

EC: At my age memory is furtive.

JR: Just kind of, I was, I asked if you had been principally a political writer and you just told me that you were kind of all over the board. What can you tell me about some of these people, a bunch of Maine newspapermen. Lal Lemieux?

EC: Well, Lal Lemieux was a writer, political writer for the Lewiston papers. And he was also known as Lewiston's largest dwarfs. I don't know if you've -

JR: I've never heard that, no.

EC: He was a short, little guy. As far as I knew, he took that kindly. I only knew him well enough to call him by his first name and vice versa, we didn't. But I, in 1959 I was, I won a fellowship to go to France and serve the new government with Charles De Gaulle and took a leave of absence to do it. And the press boys in Augusta gave me a farewell dinner, and I think Lal was probably there. And Governor Clauson came over to shake my hand, great old guy. That was (*unintelligible word*) contact with Lal, and that gag about him. Do I hear something beeping?

JR: Yeah, it's making some noise. I think we're all set. Let me make sure, I'll stop it and play back. (*Pause*). Okay, so, and do you have any sense of, or an impression of Lal's work as far as like his politics?

EC: No, I never -

JR: Okay. How about Faunce Pendexter?

EC: Faunce Pendexter I barely knew. I can't even pull up what the association was.

JR: He also worked for the Lewiston -

EC: Was he?

JR: Yeah. I'm going to give you some -

EC: The principal guy I knew in Lewiston was Ed Penley.

JR: Penley, okay, yeah.

EC: Who got my, who took my job in Portland when I left, and bought my house. Yeah, he was a dry humored, sarcastic man. Is he on your list?

JR: Yeah, he was actually the next one I was going to ask.

EC: And a very adroit, I always thought, observer of the political scene, very. I thought frankly he was, that he was better than the Lewiston paper, with all due respect, deserved. (*Unintelligible phrase*) Ed Penley, pretty good analyst, just a little prejudiced one way or another, but a good man.

JR: How about Louis-Philippe Gagne?

EC: Don't remember him.

JR: He, I think he was the founder or publisher of *le Messager*.

EC: *Le Messager*, ah-hah, no, I didn't know him. I remember the paper. I've been in his office. Do you speak French?

JR: A little bit.

EC: Yeah, you have a French name.

JR: Yeah, like most of my family does, but -

EC: France is my favorite country. That's a diversion, let's get on with the thing.

JR: How about Faust Couture?

EC: Didn't know him.

JR: He was in radio with WCOU.

EC: No.

JR: How about F. Parker Hoy with WLAM?

EC: I can't really put him in perspective.

JR: No, okay. Don Hansen?

EC: Well Don Hansen I knew well, and he came in after Ed Penley and for many years ran the editorial pages. And whenever I would come to Maine I would take a look at his page and I always thought he did a very good job at it. It might get a dissent from other people, but my impression, he was a good work-a-day, that third page boss.

JR: How about Peter Damborg?

EC: Ah, Pete Damborg I knew very well. He was our political reporter in Augusta for a long time. And I, what do I want to say, well he said, I didn't think he, Peter for all I know about him he came from the league with Ed Penley when it came to trenchant, to political comment. And I rather remember Pete, although he was a good friend, as a, well, I don't know quite what to say. Going for the, these spectacular surface manifestations of what was going on rather than for meat which lay below. That's a mixed metaphor I think. But no, Pete and I, I knew his wife well, both his first and second wife, he put me in touch with a man who sold their boat in Friendship, good man, I went to his funeral. He was an asset, yeah, he was, it seems to me, my memory may be playing me tricks on this one, he was very much a management, he played up to management. He would have nothing to do with the newspaper guild, the newspaper union, which I was a member of until I went on the editorial pages. But I don't want to reprise on Pete Damborg, he was a credit to the business.

JR: Do you know why he wouldn't join the guild, did he have -?

EC: I'm sorry?

JR: Do you know why Peter Damborg wouldn't join the, oh, yeah, Peter Damborg, right.

EC: Why he wouldn't join the guild?

JR: Yeah, yeah.

EC: I think he may have thought it was in his own self-interest not to, that's the best I can, I don't want to be unkind to the dear departed.

JR: Of course, okay. What about Len Cohen?

EC: Len Cohen was one of my best friends on the paper, and remained so after we both left. First class reporter. *New York Times*, a kind of straightforward writer. He covered Portland City Hall as it's never been covered since, in my opinion. He knew more about, or as much about, what was going forward in Portland politics as the politicians did. And sometimes they didn't know what they'd said until they read it the next day what Len Cohen wrote. And covering the legislature he was equally thorough. And I remember in particular, he wrote long, his stories were, had long runovers for the inside pages, which is fine. And Ernie Chard, who was then the managing editor, tried to get Len to shorten and that didn't work, and according to my recollection Ernie would try to chop, to edit Len Cohen's copy so that it was shorter than it had been written. And he failed because the minute Chard began to edit the whole thing, no fault of Chard's, it came apart. Cohen was, his writing had what they used to say, all good writing should have unity, coherence, and I've forgotten the, and emphasis, unity, coherence, and emphasis we were taught. And Len Cohen had it. Good man. He's now deceased.

JR: He is?

EC: I knew his, I knew both his wives. Good fellow, little man, tiny little guy. Came from upstate of Maine, graduated from Bowdoin, was Phi Beta Kappa and I never knew it, he never told it, I read it in his obit.

JR: How about Bob Crocker, do you have any information?

EC: Yes, Bob Crocker was AP.

JR: Yeah.

EC: Have I got that right?

JR: Yes.

EC: And I knew Bob Crocker after he went to Washington and took a job with the newspaper

bureau. First class, straightforward journeyman, worker nothing flashy. You didn't have time on the AP to be flashy, because they have a deadline every, well everybody does now but back then the paper could have a deadline without being scooped by television. No more, but he was writing on deadline all the time because he had to. Very good man. I can't give a rounded picture of many of these people, but it was pleasant to work with him, very business like, down to earth.

JR: Well that's one of the, you know, just a recollection of these people is great. What about Dave [***sic*** Bill] Langzettel?

EC: Who?

JR: Dave [Bill] Langzettel?

EC: Dave? His name wasn't Dave. He worked with, he was on the AP. What was his first name? Well I have only the highest praise for him as well. I wouldn't say that about everybody on the AP. But what the devil was is first name? It wasn't Dave.

JR: It wasn't Dave? Okay, that's what I have here.

EC: He had a brother who was, ran the Portland pilot ship, pilot boat. I can't remember his name either.

JR: What about Lorin Arnold?

EC: Ah, Doc Arnold.

JR: Doc, yeah.

EC: *Bangor Daily News* political reporter, very fine gentleman. He was frequently referred to in the press as the dean of Maine political reporters, which a dean he was, he'd been at it longer than anybody else. And toward the end what we'd say, we'd say, "Good morning Dean," and he'd bow; a very low key, kind of a country gentleman. I had the highest opinion of him as well.

JR: How about Phil Johnson?

EC: I think he was television.

JR: Yeah, he (*unintelligible phrase*).

EC: I knew him but not well.

JR: Jim Brunelle?

EC: Jim Brunelle I only knew when I came back to Maine and began to see his, he'd done, he'd already done his editorial writing and was just doing his column. I've gotten to know him

since, and I think he's much the best, the columnist most worth reading on the op-ed page of the *Press Herald* as we speak. Yeah, good man, and a great, very thorough researcher. Nothing but praise for Jim Brunelle.

JR: Did you have any run-ins with John Gould?

EC: Oh, yes, on John Gould forever. Graduate of Bowdoin, he got his start in journalism on the local paper in Brunswick, in which he wrote, besides playing reporter, he wrote the column every week called "Jimlings in the Wave" which comes from Lewis Carroll. All over the map, but a very humorous writer, and I think humor, humorous writing was his strong point. He was a journalist somewhere in the middle, but I think his name and fame are linked with humor. My first father-in-law and he were associated in running with a daily, a weekly paper in Lisbon Falls after the original owner died. My father-in-law's name was Goud, G-O-U-D. That didn't really work. They fell out and that ended. But, no, John Gould was one of the first class humorists.

JR: How about [Edward D.] Rabbit Talberth?

EC: Rab Talberth was, covered the legislature and City Hall earlier for the paper. And his favorite ploy would be to go to one member of the city council, get him to say something outrageous, and then he'd run to another member of the city council and say, Harry Libby says so and so. He, because he built a story where none grew before that way, and I never thought it was particular enlightening. And then he went to the legislature and I have no memory of his coverage, but I kind of suspect that it was of the same order, more superficial than not, flashy things that catch the eye but not so good on the basics. Yeah, I'm really insulting the man at this distance. He did get tangled up with some, involving something about distribution of liquor in Maine where he I think tried to tape a conversation in the back seat of a car without the knowledge of the person he was talking to. And where Senator, then Senator Fred Payne, came in with a picture I don't remember. But Rab Talberth I remember, my recollection is he came out so tarnished from that, but that, listen, I don't have the details, I don't want to slander the man. He was a good colleague, very helpful in, to the other staff of whom I was one young reporter. Very helpful, tips about where to look for something.

JR: Great. What about Floyd Nute?

EC: Floyd Nute I knew, but not well. I have no way to judge his rating. Was he AP?

JR: UPI it says.

EC: UPI, yeah, okay. I used to have a boat and we'd take out this gang sailing, Len Cohen, Floyd Nute, Bob (*name*), (*unintelligible phrase*). Got any others there?

JR: Oh yeah, I -

EC: I don't know what this has got to do with the late senator.

JR: Oh, we try to, we want to know about the senator, but we also want to know about like the

Maine landscape, too, at the time. Like, you know, several, like newspapermen.

EC: Well, television has changed the whole thing. Journalism has changed.

JR: Tell me about that, what are your impressions of it?

EC: My impression of it is that television has forced a bottom line mentality. There's forced journalism in the format of entertainment and less into keeping people informed. I don't think, with certain limited exceptions, notably the *New York Times*, I do not see the *Wall Street Journal* or the *Washington Post*, I used to see the *Post.* But not many papers these days in my opinion that are giving the readers what they ought to have and being well, my definition of the obligation of a newspaper is that readers should be well informed. And I, the *Portland Press Herald* today plays a lot of the summaries called the 'feel good stuff', a little mawkish if you will, all this recent business with Pearl Harbor. I take nothing from the people who were at Pearl Harbor and other veterans, but it was over-played, huge pictures, layouts. And plenty of days when the *Press Herald* has nothing on page one that adds to the base of useful knowledge. But I find the *New York Times* rates high in that respect, although it, too, has an awful lot of mush in it. The news play and the news announcers on the editorial side still take it very seriously. I think even the *New York Times* is over-written in some respects these days. But the television put an end to the evening papers, television put an end to deadlines in the middle of the afternoon. We used to be able to get a story in the evening paper as late as three o'clock, but no more. Television, that visual medium, does not, in my opinion, give people what they need to know in the, citizens of a republic.

JR: Great. Since like, probably since your days in the *Portland Press Herald* and, you know, that compared with like your time after Washington, what sense do you have of how politics has changed in Maine? Like, what can you say to that? Kind of a broad question, but wherever you want to take that.

EC: Well, I think Ed Muskie and Frank Coffin and other leaders transformed Maine into a two party state, with all the benefits thereof. I wasn't here, but I mean Ken Curtis was a good governor. I thought Jock whatever his name is.

JR: Oh, McKernan?

EC: McKernan was an adequate, I don't remember his doing anything seriously bad. I didn't look for it, but I can tell you that. I think Angus King has been a good governor, I know Angus very well, he used to be, had been my lawyer at one time; sailed together. No, I think politics are pretty, are generally a credit to the state. And Maine gets out front on some pretty progressive stuff now and then, like lap computers or environmental law. I can't think of any prime examples, but that's my impression. And I, you know, I think politics in Maine are far healthier for being an active two-party system. I think term limits are sort of productive. I think governmental financing of political campaigns ought to be the way of the future and probably won't be. It should be, it works in Europe, in a lot of countries. Our political campaigns last twenty-four months, and England does it in thirty days. That's another story. Yeah, I think generally politics in Maine are in good shape.

JR: Great.

EC: That doesn't mean I have studied, that I'm pro-study these days.

JR: All right, do you have anything more to add about your experiences, or about Muskie?

EC: Nothing probably that's an absolute must. No, I don't guess I do.

JR: Okay, -

EC: I hope I've, I hope this has been worth, something worth your while.

JR: Oh, this has definitely been worth our while.

EC: Didn't feel constructive to me, that there are so many questions I would have said were not relevant to the -

JR: Yeah, we like to get a well-rounded picture of what happened.

EC: Oh, I know what I was going to say, one thing I want to add about Muskie. When he was in the legislature, when he was governor, when he was running for the Senate, I think I'd like to say that the question of religion never came up. And here's a guy who's middle name is the name of half a dozen popes, Sixtus. The question never came up, which is a credit to the state of Maine, and a credit to the senator. I guess it slopped over when he got, went national and tried to run for president and the *Manchester Union Leader* got after him and all that. The only remotely religious thing that I ever recall his saying, and he said that I guess when he was in the presidential league and apropos, I guess it must have been abortion, when he said, "A woman is God's vessel." Which is straight, I guess, straight out of the Vatican, which was fine with me. So, he believed what he believed but it never came into Maine politics. As I say, that's a credit to the state of Maine and a credit to the senator.

JR: Great. And now I'll just ask, do you know of anyone else that might be of use for us to interview, like former newspaper people or others that you can think of?

EC: Well, Dwight Sargent, you know who he was?

JR: Okay, he was on this list, I remember you mentioned him at the *Portland Press Herald*.

EC: Yeah, and he went from there to be curator of the Nieman Foundation at Harvard which, you know about that.

JR: I don't, actually.

EC: That's a foundation, which, well ten or a dozen journalists, Americans and ten or a dozen journalists from foreign countries, go to Harvard for a year and study anything they want to.

And the people who attend it are the cream of American journalism. And Dwight went from, I don't know which happened first, went from Portland to become chief editorial writer for the old *New York Herald Tribune*, great Republican, Whitney newspaper, whether that came first or his going to Harvard as curator of the Nieman Foundation came first, I don't know. But he was, and he was also the founder of the Lovejoy event, I don't know if you know about that, at Colby College every year in the name of the larger parish, [Elijah Parish] Lovejoy, who was a Colby graduate and a Civil War time anti-slavery martyr whose press was burned. And he was, I guess he was killed in Alton, Illinois during the, right after the Civil War. Anyway, in his name a prominent journalist is brought to Colby each year in the fall, gets an honorary degree, makes a speech. Dwight started that. This is more than you need to know about Dwight, but he knew Muskie better than I, and he now lives in Pelham, New York, which isn't exactly convenient.

JR: Right, we never know. Anyone else that you can think of?

EC: No.

JR: Okay. Actually, if we could take a quick look at that list, if any of them, I mentioned most of these people but some at the bottom kind of drifted from them-

EC: I don't think, well I see you got John Cole down here, Peter Cox, yeah. Red Cousins, he's long gone. Jeb Byrne I knew extremely well, he was in Washington, too, working for some department or other. No, that's a good list, I can't think of anything else.

JR: Okay, so John Cole and Peter Cox, are they still around?

EC: Yes, John Cole lives in Brunswick, Peter Cox is not far, Phippsburg or Georgetown (*unintelligible word*).

JR: Okay, great.

EC: Oh, I know, another anecdote, I was not present, but when the subject of who was going to run for governor in 1956, that's the year he was elected wasn't it?

JR: His first campaign would be '54.

EC: Fifty-four, all right. The incumbent governor was Burton M. Cross, colorless, endless parade of Republican governors. I guess he was a florist or something in Hallowell, which in itself is, I remember that. The scene is the Democratic convention in Lewiston, and a conclave with a smoke filled room if you will, at the Hotel DeWitt. The question, who in God's name is going to run against Burt Cross? And after tossing around a few names, as I understand it, I was not there, Ed Muskie said, "Oh hell, I'll run." And the rest is history. He remade, with some help, a political streak in the state. That sounds like him, yeah. Okay, I'll quit.

JR: All set? Okay, great, thank you very much.

EC: Well, I hope it's helpful. I'm flattered of course to be asked.

JR: A lot of those anecdotes were really good, and just like your impressions of him, too.

End of Interview