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Interview with Anne (Desjardins) Freeman by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Freeman, Anne (Desjardins)

Interviewer

Nicoll, Don

Date

October 10, 1998

Place

Presque Isle, Maine

ID Number

MOH 051

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Biographical Note

Anne Freeman was born Anne Desjardins on November 21, 1912, in New Canada Plantation, Maine. Her parents were both at one-time schoolteachers, but were farmers when she was growing up. She attended the New Canada public schools until fifth grade, grade school at the convent in Fort Kent, Maine, and graduated from Fort Kent High School. After schooling, Anne began work for J.C. Penney in Fort Kent. There she met a clerk at the A&P by the name of Joe Freeman. Joe eventually became manager of the A&P, and they moved to Presque Isle. They bought a tea house in Presque Isle, expanded it, and renamed it the Presque Isle Grill. During World War II, they were busy feeding the soldiers that had returned from Europe, and they fed the prisoners that worked in the Northern Maine fields. In the late 1940s, they sold the restaurant and opened a Pepsi bottling plant in downtown Presque Isle. Anne and Joe were Democrats. They were strong supporters of Ed Muskie and the Democratic Party in Maine.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussion of : Northern Maine during the Depression; Joe Freeman; getting into the restaurant business; operating a Presque Isle restaurant during WWII; becoming a Pepsi bottler; registering Democrat in Northern Maine; 1954 Democratic campaigns; Ed Muskie's progression in politics; Joe Freeman's political ambitions; and meeting the Muskies in

Washington.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: We're interviewing Anne Freeman at her home in Leisure Village in Presque Isle, Maine on Saturday, October 10, 1998. Anne, would you state your full name and your date and place of birth?

Anne Freeman: My name is Anne Freeman. I was born in New Canada Plantation, which was five miles from Fort Kent. I was born on November the 21st, 1912. I think it was 1912.

DN: How big was New Canada?

AF: I don't know, but it had it's town office and it's schools. And what the population was I don't know. This was a farmland.

DN: Was your father a farmer?

AF: Yes.

DN: Potatoes?

AF: Yeah, though they did grow oats and stuff like that, too.

DN: How many were there in your family?

AF: There were ten of us. And they're all gone except me.

DN: You're the last of the family. Now, in your home growing up, did you speak French or English, or both?

AF: We usually spoke English until we were of school age, because my mother was Irish, and

my father was French. But my father also was a school teacher, so

DN: Oh, did he teach school and farm at the same time?

AF: No, he taught school before he got a family. Then he, I don't know how it came about, I think the father gave the boys all a farm or something like that. I'm not up to that.

DN: What was the family name, by the way? Your family name?

AF: Desjardins.

DN: Desjardins.

AF: Yeah, which would be Gardener, but we called it Desjardins.

DN: Now, you went to school in New Canada. Did you?

AF: I went there until the fifth grade. Then I went to the convent in Fort Kent, and that's where I did my grade school. And then I went to high school in Fort Kent.

DN: Was that at the convent school also or?

AF: No, the high school was public high school.

DN: And when did you, and what did you do after high school?

AF: I went to work at J.C. Penney's. And it was during the Depression, so you didn't make much money then.

DN: Were you living at home?

AF: No, I had to live in town.

DN: When did you meet Joe?

AF: I met Joe the year he graduated from college, and we dated and dated and dated.

DN: Now, where was Joe born?

AF: He was born in Wallagrass, Maine.

DN: Which is also a plantation.

AF: Yeah, I think so. It's the country anyways, out in the country.

DN: Was his experience growing up similar to yours?

AF: I don't know. I didn't meet him until he was through college.

DN: Where did he go to college?

AF: He went to college at St. Thomas and St. Joseph. He went to high school, and I don't know which one it was. I think he went to high school at St. Thomas, but I don't know. This was in Canada. And then he did his college at one of those schools.

DN: Also in Canada?

AF: Yeah.

DN: And then came back. And when were you married?

AF: You're forgetting that I'm an elderly woman now. How could I remember the date?

DN: But this was sometime during the Depression, I assume.

AF: Oh, well yes, naturally. You weren't around for the Depression.

DN: Oh yes I was. I'm not that much younger than you.

AF: No, we were married, let's see, sixty-three years ago. But that, I think it's that. If I had known

DN: Nineteen thirty-five.

AF: Probably. That's a long time ago.

DN: How long has Joe been gone now?

AF: Be twenty-two years the second of November.

DN: Now, Joe, you met Joe after he graduated from college

AF: I met Joe, he came in to the, to Penney's. And I was downstairs working on the floor, I used to work in the office, I was on the floor. And after that, first thing you knew we were dating.

DN: But you dated for quite awhile.

AF: Oh yes, we couldn't afford to get married.

DN: And what was Joe doing for work then?

AF: He was working at A&P as a clerk, and then of course gradually he became manager. And then we started to prosper. We worked hard, it was fun. And we had Greg and that was fun.

DN: When did your daughter come along?

AF: Five years, well, Greg was six when Joanne came.

DN: Now, were you living in Fort Kent at that time?

AF: No, we were in Presque Isle then.

DN: What brought you, did the A&P bring you to Presque Isle?

AF: Yeah, he became manager and we ended up in Presque Isle. And then a very nice lady who had, you want all that? Very nice lady who had a tearoom and used to go in to the A&P to shop was, became very friendly with Joe. And she decided she wanted to sell her tearoom, so Joe came home and asked me what I thought. And I said, "Let's buy." And we bought her out and we went in the restaurant business. And the war came along and we were very busy. And the baby had been born then. The baby was born, Joanne was born the last year we were in. She was just a little baby when we bought this. And

DN: This was when, '41, '42?

AF: About that time. When the war came. And, now I've lost my thought.

DN: You bought the tea room and

AF: Oh, yes, and the tea room was a tea room, you know. They used to serve in the afternoon and at five o'clock they closed. Well, she had a very good cook there. So Joe says, "Well, from now on we stay open. We feed meals." And then the base came in and we expanded. Not the room, we still had the same kind of room, but we, hours were different. We'd serve breakfast in the morning. We didn't encourage lunch, but if people came in we could serve them tea or a sandwich or something. But they came for dinner. And at night we started serving at four and we'd close the place at quarter of nine. We never kept late hours. And then we became, well, we were busy.

But we met a lot of people, you know. The base brought in a lot of people. And we made a lot of friends, and we worked hard. And as you know it was during the war and everything was rationed. But since we were feeding the military, we could get a little more stamps. We had a butcher who came to work for us. He was retired, but he was a meat cutter and he'd go over to the slaughter house when they were slaughtering and pick out what he wanted in meat.

DN: And you worked in the restaurant with Joe?

AF: Yes. And then I had to work alone because, see, the air base had Joe run another restaurant up at what is now the college, but then was the normal school. And they had a big cafeteria there

and he ran that. And I ran the grill, Presque Isle Grill.

DN: That was the name of it, Presque Isle Grill? Had it been called a tea room before?

AF: It was called a tea room. But that lady, she was awfully good to us. She was a godsend.

DN: Now, you ran the restaurant and Joe managed the cafeteria during the war. How long after the war did the cafeteria continue?

AF: It didn't. In fact, that was one thing that the Army didn't go good on. I mean, people would rather come and stand in line to get in to the Presque Isle Grill than to go to the cafeteria. We had, we served very good food, and as I say we had a good cook. And even the short order cook was good. But we were told, we always had someone who could tell us from the base, when there was a load of soldiers coming back and needed fair treatment. So one thing we always had on hand, if we didn't have it on the menu, was steaks and plenty of milk. And they didn't want a little bit of milk, they wanted the quart of milk on the table. It was pitiful, you know.

DN: So troops were transported through the base on their way back from Europe?

AF: Yeah, when they were coming home for a break. It was a big base. And then we had a lot of prisoners here, too. And all the restaurants, the eating places in town, were told when we would be getting the lunches ready for them. They'd take them out and they could work in the fields, and when it was our turn we'd have all their lunches packed.

DN: So you were providing meals for returning soldiers, for, lunches for the prisoners, as well as your public restaurant and the cafeteria. You were busy people.

AF: Yes, but we were young.

DN: And after the war, a lot of that business dropped off?

AF: After the war, it's a fairy story, you know. During the war, during the, when we were in this tie-up, we became very friendly with the beverage people. And this man especially, he was an Orange Crush man, he was a salesman for Orange Crush. And he wanted, he was trying to talk Joe into going into the beverage business. So we listened and then we talked about it and decided it might be a good idea. So Joe went to see the Pepsi in New York and got, signed up, because they had, the people; let's see, what was their name? Hedricks had the cons-, they had the franchise, but they weren't interested in it, they'd never done too much. So we had to get the franchise and we wanted both Pepsi and 7-Up, not, Orange Crush, and anything else that went with it.

So we sold, I'm going to make this story short, you'll be here all night. We sold our business, practically gave it away, to our chef because she was good and we felt she'd keep it up and serve good food. Of course we found out that when you're working for yourself, you don't, you economize a little bit. I think that's what she did, but anyway. And we sold, we had a big block

right on Main Street that we had bought. We sold that, we borrowed money, bought the land where Pepsi is now, and built a plant. And we went into the Pepsi business.

DN: When was that?

AF: If you had told me to get all those dates, I'd a gone looking.

DN: The exact date isn't terribly important. Was it a couple of years after the war, or?

AF: Oh, it had to be, or shortly after, because that's when we started out with a very small plant. If you saw the plant today you'd know it was small. It's big now.

DN: During the years of the Depression, when you and Joe were married and after, did you, either of you have much interest in politics?

AF: Yeah. But you know what bothered us was, we'd ride, you know, and listen to the radio. And we'd say, "It's too bad to be a Democrat because you never get anywhere." And then things changed. You see, when he was with the A&P, he wasn't allowed to, neither was I, allowed to register. We had to register as independents; that burned us. Then we were no longer with the A&P. We went in to vote one day and the clerk of courts, the clerk of whatever that clerk is, she was sitting there, you know

DN: City clerk.

AF: yeah, the city clerk. And he says, she said, "Well, what are you going to be now?" Big smile on her face. And he says, "I'm going to register a Democrat." And she was a strong Republican. And she went (*makes face?*), and we were very But we got a chance to be active when Ed ran.

DN: Was that your first involvement in a campaign?

AF: Yeah.

DN: How did you get tied up with that campaign?

AF: Because here was a young man, ambitious, who wanted to do something. And Joe, if you remember, was a very ambitious man. And they clicked, you know.

DN: Did somebody approach Joe or did Joe make the move, do you remember?

AF: I think he must have made the move, because he wasn't a back-seater. And we'd been listening all this time, every year. Never had a Democrat that could run really. That's how it started.

DN: I'm interested, dropping back, you said that when you worked for Penney's and he worked for A&P you couldn't register. Were you told directly by the?

AF: I wasn't told not to register. But A&P, they were supposed, anybody working for them had to be registered independent.

DN: Was that true of the clerks in the store as well as the managers?

AF: Well, yes. Joe was a clerk before he became a manager. Yep.

DN: Now, in 1954 you got involved in the Ed Muskie campaign. Were you also involved in Ken Colbath's campaign for congress?

AF: Yeah.

DN: Had you known Ken before? Was Joe active in getting Ken to run, or?

AF: Joe encouraged any man to run politics. He tried it himself, it didn't work. But he would have been good if he'd ever been elected.

DN: Joe ran several times.

AF: Twice.

DN: Did he decide after that, that running for office was not for him?

AF: He decided that he had other things that he could do that wouldn't bring him disappointment.

DN: What do you remember about Ed Muskie and the campaign of '54?

AF: All I can remember there is that he was starting fresh, and he was having it not easy. All I can remember is that we were so busy helping each other. What a celebration we had afterwards.

DN: Where was the celebration?

AF: Where? Might have been at our house, I don't know. But then we went down to the ball when he was, and we had a big celebration then. We had Ed and, what was her name? Amy. Not Ed,

DN: Oh, Ken and Amy.

AF: Ken and Amy with us.

DN: Now, you entertained Ed during the campaign, as I remember.

AF: Well, he became kind of like a fixture in our house. If ever he was up in the county, and

whoever was in charge of his reservations would have a reservation at a hotel, he'd say, "No, I'm going to the Freeman's." So it was always, if there was a bed handy, he'd sleep in it.

DN: What was it like entertaining Ed Muskie?

AF: It was like part of the family. I mean, we became like that. I mean, let's face it, when he started out he didn't even own a dress suit. It was. When did you start working for him?

DN: Fifty-four.

AF: Fifty-four. He was, there was nothing about him we didn't like, nothing I couldn't say to him.

DN: Did you, what sorts of things did you say to him?

AF: Oh, I'd correct him sometimes, you know. And he was awfully, you know that when we were in Florida in the years that went by, whenever he'd get tired in Congress, he'd fly in and stay with us. Sometimes Jane was with him, sometimes he was alone. He was very, very fond of Joe. But Joe was very good to him.

DN: How did you feel about Ed's policies as governor?

AF: Well, at the time, you know, I always, we were so glad to have a Democrat in there, that anything he had done would have been fine. Can you remember how long it had been since we'd had any Democrat in Maine?

DN: At that time it was twenty years about.

AF: It was hopeless. So naturally, whatever Ed did as governor was just great. He'd come up and campaign, when he campaigned the next run. He would sit in the front seat because he was so long-legged and Jane and Joe would sit in the back seat. And we'd, I'd drive, and we'd do all the county, made a stop at all the houses. The three of them would get out. Thank goodness I could sit behind the wheel.

DN: You were the driver.

AF: I was the driver.

DN: Was that true in your family generally, or . . . ?

AF: No, just when they were campaigning. But we had fun.

DN: Do you remember any dramatic encounters during those campaigns?

AF: I don't. Maybe, Jane was a good campaigner; she was very good with him.

DN: How did your relationships with other people in Presque Isle change, or did they change, when you became active in the Democratic campaigns?

AF: No, I think we were liked even more. We weren't disliked, you know. And being strong Democrats, it's just like being a Catholic. You stick up for what you believe in and people accept you. It was a, we had a great life. I wish Joe had lived a little longer, but it wasn't to be so. Because he enjoyed politics.

DN: What was it that gave you special pleasure in politics and gave Joe special pleasure?

AF: It's being able to express yourself and have people listen to you. Not say, "Well, what chance do you have? You're just a Democrat." Because that's what, the way we felt when we'd listen to the radio and get all these speeches, when we didn't have anyone running that was strong enough to beat. It was nice to have the Democrats come into their own, and they're not bad now either. Of course, I wouldn't say, we do have a President that's living it up. But . . .

DN: Now, did you sense any difference or feel any differently when you moved from Fort Kent to Presque Isle? You were in the valley, which was heavily Democratic.

AF: Yeah. But you see I was very young then and we were very, struggling, and we didn't . . . See, we moved from Presque Isle, from Fort Kent to Presque Isle when Greg was two years old. So we weren't very, we weren't involved in anything then. We were involved in trying to make a living. But our parents were strong Democrats, and they'd never gotten anything out of it really, because the Republicans were the kings.

DN: Was politics a topic of discussion at home?

AF: Yeah. My dad was a strong Democrat, but my mother was worse. She was, she had, it was a French community. And she taught all these men how to read so they could . . . She was a school teacher; so was Dad.

DN: Did she continue to teach after they were married?

AF: Maybe she did but when I came along, she wasn't teaching. I was on the tail end of the family.

DN: You were one of the younger . . . ?

AF: Yeah, I was third from the last, and we were ten in the family. But she, she was a spitfire. Her Irish didn't . . .

DN: Was she from the valley, too?

AF: No, she wasn't. She came from Fort Kent, or, I don't know how that came in. I didn't get the family, we didn't have a family history so I can't tell you on that. But she was a Sweeney. And she and Dad met when they were both teaching.

DN: Now, did you get to know Joe's family?

AF: Yeah.

DN: Were they strong Democrats?

AF: Well, if they weren't they soon became.

DN: And they were a farm family also?

AF: Yeah.

DN: Now, do you remember, was there any change from your point of view in Ed after he went to the Senate and got involved in national politics?

AF: To us there wasn't. I mean, we saw more of him after he got in the Senate than, well, as much anyway. Because we visited in Washington, both coming and going, and we would check in at a hotel. And then lots of times we'd have them come in for drinks, and Frank [Coffin] and Ruth [Coffin]. Were you in Washington?

DN: Uh-hunh.

AF: Did you ever come over to the hotel?

DN: I don't recall specifically. I think, I remember Ed making plans for dinner with you and Joe. But most frequently the staff members would end up working late, and we didn't do much dinner during the week.

AF: Well, Ruth was the one that arranged to get us a private showing of the White House. And then we had dinner a few times over at the Muskie's when we were in town. We'd always see each other. And sometimes, like I had lunch one day in the senator's dining room, whatever you call that. We always saw him. And he always visited us; sometimes with Jane, sometimes alone.

DN: And you got to know Frank Coffin, too, during the whole period. Do you remember first meeting Frank?

AF: I remember, and I think you were with Frank. Didn't, at the beginning, didn't you travel around with Frank?

DN: Yes.

AF: I can remember the first time I met you I called you people "the little boys".

DN: Quite a contrast in height to Ed Muskie.

AF: Well, no, I felt you were so young. You were like kids, and so enthused about it all, you were. Those were the days. No, we enjoyed our stint with politics, and I know Joe did.

DN: Have Greg and Joanne maintained an interest in politics?

AF: Oh, yes. They're strong Democrats. And Kay, Greg's, you've never met her, have you? She's, she came from a strong Republican family, and you know, a convert. She is such a strong Democrat; it's so funny. She says, "Well my father said." "Now Kay, you're marrying into a strong Democratic family, you've got to change your politics." She said, "I was going to anyway." But they're strong. Maybe not as strong as, at the moment here in Presque Isle, I think it's kind of quiet for the Democrats. If you, you have to have a leader, you know? Right now it's quiet. Now, Floyd doesn't do too much now. It's quiet. And, of course, I'm out of it completely.

DN: When you look back over the last really sixty years, and you think about Ed Muskie, what do you think his major contributions were to the state?

AF: Well, I'd say his knowledge of what was going on in the world. I really would. And he tried to, I think he did an awful lot for Maine. Brought Maine up on its toes instead of sitting back on its heels. I think, I don't know. I could find nothing wrong with him. But you see, politics is like love, it's kind of blind. If you're a strong Democrat, or a strong Republican, you're going to fight for it all, you know?

DN: Thank you very much, Anne.

AF: You're welcome. Did I bore ya?

End of Interview

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