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Handy, James oral history interview

Robert Ruttmann

Interview with James Handy by Robert Ruttmann

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee
Handy, James

Interviewer
Ruttmann, Robert

Date
July 17, 2000

Place
Lewiston, Maine

ID Number
MOH 207

Biographical Note

James R. "Jim" Handy was born in Lewiston, Maine on July 26, 1954. His parents were Robert E., Sr. and Josephine (Palman) Handy, and he is third generation Polish-American. He graduated from Lewiston High School in 1972, and attended the University of Southern Maine in Portland, Maine. He has been a member of local, county, and state Democratic Committees and was a member of the Environmental Action Club. He was in the Maine house of representatives from 1982-92 and served two years in the Maine state senate from 1992-4. He was chair of Labor Committee, the Aging, Retirement and Veterans' Committee, and the Legal Affairs Committee.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: 1969-72 presidential campaign; 1972 Manchester Union Leader; environmental protection; Vietnam War; civil rights; anecdote about maternal grandfather; Jimmy Carter; unspoken racism in Maine; paternal grandmother: first Democratic Chair of the Board of Voter Registration in Auburn; one-armed paper hanger anecdote: great uncle; Muskie as a speaker; Bill Bradley; Androscoggin River; and the election of 2000.

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Transcript

Robert Ruttmann: This is Robert Ruttmann interviewing Jim Handy on July the 17th in the year 2000 in the Muskie Archives at Bates College. And sir, we're going to start off by asking you your name and to spell it, please, for the record.

Jim Handy: Sure, my name is James R. Handy. The last name is spelled H-A-N-D-Y.

RR: Thank you. Where, Mr. Handy, and when were you born?

JH: I was born in Lewiston, Maine on June 26th, 1954.

RR: Ah, that's a nice year to be born, the year of Muskie's gubernatorial campaign.

JH: That's right.

RR: Can you describe the community that you grew up in and if you have any recollections of it like possibly the social, the ethnic, the religious fabric of the community?

JH: I lived in Lewiston all my life, and primarily when I, as I was growing up in my younger years this was a community that, you know, was eighty percent Franco-American. And I'm third generation Polish-American. So the emphasis in growing up was on Franco-American heritage, as it is now, and I think that's, it's wonderful that people can celebrate their heritage, being people of a different ethnic background that felt somewhat forgotten in a sense because we were the distinct minority, the twenty percent of us that made up vastly different ethnic backgrounds and cultures, but the predominant culture being Franco-American.

I was raised Roman Catholic in that community, so I had that in common with my Franco-American neighbors, which we all got along extremely well. I think by and large a very tolerant community, respectful of people and individuals and their ways of life, respectful in, with regard to education for example. Many people when I was growing up, and even in my generation, did not attend college, and many of my relatives, some never even finished high school. Some left school by the eighth grade. Looking back on that, however, there was always a great emphasis and value placed on education in the community, with my, you know, family as well as people from outside the family. People who had worked in the textile mills like my mother did and many of my relatives or the shoe factories, although they may have had a high school graduation or elementary school graduation, always emphasized the importance of education and probably in large part due to their experience.

When I was growing up, my, I have a brother eleven months older than me and a twin sister, my brother was the exceptional student through school and went on to college and graduate school. My parents expected that my sister and I would not go to college, financial reasons or that we just weren't, quote, "college material." I certainly heard that phrase growing up a lot. And felt that we should go to work, and I think that speaks to the kind of culture that really was pretty much the norm in our community, that you didn't have to go to college in order to get a good job. And that was, may have been a good thought then, but I think many people recognized that in order to have a good job- I don't mean just in terms of financial success although I think that was a primary emphasis in my growing up, that people looked at your, measured your success by how much money you made. I think now that has transitioned to it's not so much, it is, the money's important, yes, but what quality of life do you have, do you enjoy what you do is given a fairer weight in that equation.

RR: Do you think the educational standards have improved since the time when you grew up?

JH: I think educational standards have improved. I think education, the emphasis on education with respect to policy makers is variable as the weather is in Maine. Sometimes there's a

movement toward enhancing standards, and when you enhance standards, it means that money's got to follow because you can't have smaller classrooms, good facilities, the array of materials, books, and so forth that one needs to obtain a good education. But yeah, they have changed, and I think, depending on how you define progress, that we've progressed, and I think we've made great strides in our education system. But I think underpinning all that is the ethic that education is important in whatever you do.

RR: Okay, so you mentioned that there was not that much division between French Americans and the, you said the twenty percent composition of -

JH: All these other, all those other ethnic groups.

RR: Yeah.

JH: No, we just got along, you know. It was an enriching experience to have people of different cultures around you although primarily Franco-American. It wasn't an issue. You know, when you look at maybe other communities across this country where there are either racial divisions or ethnic divisions, and that I never felt. I never felt that even though in the minority there was an overt discrimination or anything that was trying to hold back people who weren't Franco-American. The only thing that I would point to that was, you know, somewhat uncomfortable, was the fact that not enough accord was paid to people of different ethnic background other than Franco-American. And, you know, Lewiston-Auburn, in Lewiston in particular, has a, just a multitude of different ethnic backgrounds and cultures that really enriches Lewiston, you know. It's, these are the threads that make the tapestry, which is Lewiston.

RR: That's wonderful. Your parents, first of all could you tell me what your parents' names were?

JH: Yeah, my dad's name is Robert E. Handy, Sr., and his background is Anglo- Saxon, his family came from England and Scotland, kind of Rockford Yankees. And my mother's side, her name is Josephine Palman. They came from, her parents came from Poland, and that in and of itself gave us a really strong connection to Ed Muskie. Polish Americans kind of looked to Ed Muskie as a real significant role model for all of us.

RR: Kind of an icon.

JH: Yeah, an icon, that really is *apropos*. My grandparents, when they came to this country in the early nineteen hundreds, came through Ellis Island, and they, processing time was over a period of days, weeks, sometimes months, even years for people. And I remember my, the story that my aunt shared with me about my grandparents coming, which is maybe off the mark here as far as what we're talking about, but it really typifies this country's openness to people of different cultures and the positions that they can hold in our country, whether in corporate America or in public America, in public life.

My grandfather became friends with one of the immigration people on Ellis Island and just

became a, just a good pal, just a good friend, and when it came finally the time for he and his wife to be processed through, my grandfather's, he asked my grandfather, you know, to say his name and spell it. And my grandfather said the name was (*name*), and the immigration officer said, "I can't spell that. We're going to call you Palman." So the immigration gave them the name that they lived in this country with, Palman. And *paan* in Polish means friend or pal and it also can mean man so that's where he came up with the name Palman for my grandparents; kind of a neat story.

RR: That is, yeah, kind of anecdotal story. What are your parents' occupations, Mr. Handy?

JH: My mother passed away in 1996, and she worked in one of the textile mills here in Lewiston, in the Libby mill. And my father's a postal worker, life-long postal worker, and he's retired now.

RR: I see, that's wonderful. Were they involved in any community activities as you were growing up?

JH: My parents' involvement in our education was, was, it was immense. And I'm so grateful that they got involved. You know, they participated in, in whether it's field trips, my brother and I were in the band through middle school and through high school, and my parents were very active in that. And through their involvement in the band became good friends with Shep Lee, who was very close to Ed Muskie and which was how I got involved in politics myself when I was ten years old. My parents' involvement was pretty much within the family and the school and all those activities associated with it; they were really immersed in that.

People ask me, you know, how'd you get involved in politics? And that's a separate story, but (*unintelligible word*) because your parents really weren't political types, which is true. My parents weren't political types, but they read, they stressed the importance of reading the newspaper, keeping up with the issues of the day, and fulfilling the most significant responsibility of a citizen, which was to vote. And that was instilled in all of us, so we always tried to keep up on the current events and to go on Election Day and vote and become involved in that process. That was the bare minimum that was expected of us. I took a more involved route by, you know, running for office and serving in the local Democratic committee, the county Democratic committee and the state Democratic committee. So their involvement was pretty much limited to our activities but really stressed that we had something to do for our community and for other people.

RR: Wonderful. You mentioned that you got politically involved at the tender age of ten. Could you talk a little bit more about that?

JH: Sure. In 1964 I was, my family was friends with Shep Lee and his kids, who also were, we were in the band together, we were in Cub Scouts, we were in Cub Scouts together. And we just became real good friends, and one day after school Shep Lee's son John asked me if I'd be, if I wanted to come down to Democratic headquarters. And I said, "What's Democratic headquarters?" I didn't know what this was. So I got permission from my parents to go the

storefront right in downtown on Lisbon Street, and I was, as I am now, a person of small stature, I was considerably smaller then, they sat me on a folding chair. I could barely just see over the tabletop. And Louis Jalbert was there. You may have heard his name mentioned, and Mae Parker who was a woman of, a solid Democratic woman and very close to Ed Muskie. They sat me on a stack of phone books so I could see over the table and spent that first experience stuffing envelopes and putting stamps on them and, for mailing for the Democratic Party, and I think we were working on a [William "Bill"] Hathaway mailing at the time. That was my first involvement and ever since then I've been involved in some Democratic campaign since that time.

RR: Since the age of ten.

JH: Yeah.

RR: Wonderful. So you went to high school here in Lewiston?

JH: Yes I did.

RR: Lewiston High School?

JH: I went to Lewiston High School.

RR: Wonderful. What year did you graduate?

JH: I graduated in 1972.

RR: Okay, as you look back can you recall any specific interest, extracurricular activities that you were particularly involved with or that just captured your interest?

JH: Yeah, I mean I, aside from involved in music in the high school band and the junior high school band, I started an environmental action club at the high school and was its first president. And I think that's directly attributable to Ed Muskie and his legacy with environmental legislation and really forging the most significant environmental legislation, you know, clean water, clean air. That was a real big thing for the school to have a new club and to, it was really kind of ahead of its time, but I think part of that inspiration comes from that legacy of Ed Muskie's that, it's a legacy now, but at that time that was the issue to really become involved with. And so, that organization.

We had an interact club which was associated with the Rotary Clubs and did public service, all kinds of things, volunteered for public TV. I've served on a number of, you know, after leaving school I served on a number of non-profit boards and hopefully made some contribution to those in our community. And I think it's so important that people get involved in the community and people, especially people who are or would be policy makers to really get involved in organizations so that they keep their finger right on the pulse of what's happening.

RR: Did you go to college after high school?

JH: Yeah, I went to college. I didn't go to college until five and a half years after high school. I applied at USM, and they asked me to take a couple of courses at a campus that was located in Auburn, or at least where they were offering courses locally, which I did and was successful at. And then I was matriculated the following semester and did my bachelor's degree in two years. It took me, full, two and a half years if people want to count that other six months. I really wanted to go to college and I had a direction that I wanted to go in, which was politics and majored in political science at USM.

RR: Wonderful. What did you do in the interim before you went?

JH: I worked, I mean, I guess I fulfilled my parents' dream in that respect. I, you know, I worked. I managed a record store for a number of years in downtown Lewiston and I worked for a clothing store, mostly retail, and also held a part-time job at radio stations for about ten years reading the news and doing weekend disc jockey work, so. I usually held more than one job.

RR: So that really supported your college?

JH: Yeah, and I was able to live at home through the kindness of my parents and I saved money, I did save that money so I could go to college.

RR: That's wonderful, I'm sure you really appreciate having earned it all yourself.

JH: Yeah, I do, I do.

RR: That's, I think a lot less kids do that nowadays; or possibly even more now. But, going on from there, can you recall any particular person that left an indelible impression, I would say, on you as you were growing up and through high school and through college, if you could mention one person who impacted your life?

JH: Wow, I guess I would, I would, I guess I ought to classif--, kind of divide that and say a couple people. In terms of my community there was one, there were two teachers I had in high school, one a history teacher and one a government teacher. And I wasn't, I wasn't, I was a C student in college, I wasn't, you know, Mr. Knock-em-down straight A's. That was my brother, so -

RR: Mine, too, actually.

JH: I had, school was a real struggle for me, but I had a history teacher in eighth grade who taught me how to take notes, and I really owe a lot to that particular teacher. And I had a teacher in ninth grade who was my government teacher who was in the state legislature at the time, and he saw potential in me and urged me to go to college where at the same time there were many other people saying I wasn't college material. So that left an impression on me. Looking at it more globally, Jimmy Carter had probably more influence on me than any other politician.

RR: In what sense?

JH: His commitment to other people to me was what I wanted to do. I really illustrated to me that you can be successful, and your success can be measured in what you do for others and putting other people before yourself. I think he really came across with that kind of ethic, which I subscribe to and I think in large part because of him, he was very inspirational, and because of his commitment to human rights. And I don't mean just human rights around the world but human rights at home, too. Yeah, (*unintelligible word*) Jimmy Carter.

RR: Yeah, he really epitomizes the concept of public servant, you know, rather than self-serving.

JH: Exactly.

RR: That's interesting. Now, when did you first, we spoke earlier about when you first became politically aware, that you were ten really, and I'd like to ask you now when did you first become politically active?

JH: Yeah, I think, politically active in 1964 by starting to get involved in a campaign for the Democratic Party. I think as far as political awareness goes, my parents, I mean I modeled what my parents were doing by reading the newspaper, keeping up with current events and instilling in us the importance of participating in your democracy at a bare minimum by voting. I missed the 1970 [*sic*] [1972] Democratic primary by about a week, my birthday being the latter part of June and the primary was in the middle of June. So I, and there was an eighteen year old vote at the time. The first time I would have been eligible so it was kind of frustrating, I couldn't vote in the Democratic primary so I had to wait until the general election in 1972.

RR: Do you remember that primary at all?

JH: Yeah, yeah, it was, it was a contentious primary. It was, yeah, very contentious, I mean with the Vietnam War, and I protested the war. And the objective was not to have Nixon elected, and as far as the party goes I think at that time there was a degree of party discipline, if not an expectation if you're a Democrat you're voting for the Democrat. It was a tough time growing up. And yeah, and Vietnam and the civil rights movement overshadowed everything, and those were the things that moved us.

RR: Let's talk a little bit about the civil rights movement, maybe the voting rights act in I think it was '64 or '65.

JH: '64 and '65.

RR: Yeah, and do you, what was the political climate like especially here in Maine, you know, with all of the developments occurring in the South? What was the public attitude at the time?

JH: Well, I'd love to say that Maine didn't exhibit, well, I'd like to say that Maine wasn't adopting the racist attitudes that prevailed in the South at the time, but I think in experiencing that and looking back on it, I think that there was and perhaps still is a degree of racism in our state. It was unspoken racism, in a sense. You know, the difference between the South and here in the Northeast, in Maine, was that you didn't have a large black population, so the people in Maine tended not to feel threatened and therefore didn't have to, have to speak out in either way. But I think when we saw political leaders like Lyndon Johnson, who I admire for really taking such a step with the voting rights act of '64 and '65, that people, I mean there's some anxiety, no question about it, but I think the leadership that was exerted said to people, you know, "We're going to go through some real tough times and we've got to all get along, but we've got to do it." The leadership that came from the top, the top of this country, brought people, I think that's where it came from.

I don't, I thi-, you can look back on the civil rights movement as being a ground swell, you know, from the ground up, but I don't think you saw that in Maine. I think what you saw was, you know, Mainers would see it in the newspapers, hear it on the radio that, you know, there are civil rights marches in Montgomery and Martin Luther King making these speeches and on and on and on. But Maine was so removed from that that we fortunately had presidential leadership that said, "This is the right thing," to do before we experienced that vicious, vicious racism and bigotry that pervaded in the South.

RR: And also it takes a southerner to really champion the cause.

JH: Yeah, yeah, Texas is not known for it's, let me phrase that differently, Texas is known for pretty much, you know, being maybe stereotypical about a bullying type of persona, if you can word it that way. But Lyndon Johnson being from Texas added some credibility to that, you know. If a person from the South can take this stand then why can't I? And that leadership was critically important to bringing along the public.

RR: Do you remember Senator Muskie's involvement in this? Do you know what his attitude towards it was? I mean was he -?

JH: Well, just vaguely, but you know, he joined in that effort to wipe racism off the face of the map, you know, it's, and never expected that it was going to happen overnight or over a decade or over two decades. We still experience it now in our country. But I only vaguely remember his involvement in that.

RR: Okay, did you ever get to meet Senator Muskie?

JH: Many times, many times.

RR: Can you recall your first meeting with him and what your impression was of him?

JH: My, that's a tall guy. Being as small as I was and he being as tall as he was, he always struck an imposing figure I'm sure with most people of even average height but for me a young

kid in junior high school, I think that's when I met him. I didn't meet him until I think the probably '67, '66, '67 I would guess, and I remember I think he came to Democratic headquarters to thank the workers who were, had volunteered, and that was my first time meeting him, and it was a huge thrill. You know, he was the highest elected official not only in stature but in office that I had ever had the experience of meeting, and it was a definite thrill. You know, for some people it might be like meeting a movie star or a rock star, but I mean that was, that was an equal experience to me.

RR: What, your impression of Senator Muskie, can you describe it in a word? If you had to say one word to describe him, what would it be?

JH: Sincere.

RR: Really.

JH: Yeah, sincere. It, this, you know, and I feel even more strongly about that now because I look back on working on a number of campaigns and, you know, you meet the candidate, the candidate thanks you for partic--, for helping them out, and I'm sure they mean it, but not to the degree of sincerity that Ed Muskie meant it. He really understood that, he understood the commitment that people made to him, even at the very lowest of levels and how important and integral that was to his success. That was my impression of him, yeah.

RR: I see. When did you first run for legislature?

JH: I, hmph, that's interesting, 19-, let me go back and just talk about my paternal grandmother because she was elected the first Democratic chair of the board of voter registration in Auburn back in the late fifties, I think, when Truman was president. And that was a major step because it had been so predominantly Republican, and things were beginning to shift at that time, and maybe as early as '54. And she was politically involved, so I got that gene; that errant gene came down to me.

My father had an uncle and, it was actually her brother, who was, he talked politics a lot, and there's this little anecdote I'll share with you. He was a paper hanger by trade, and at the time there were motor cars and there were horse drawn carriages, and he was leaning up against his horse drawn carr-, his car or truck as it were with his paper hanging materials on it, and he was talking to someone who was on a horse drawn buggy. And he was leaning up against it, and a car came by and backfired and the horse reared up and his arm got caught between the buggy and car, and the truck, and he lost his arm so he truly was a one-armed paperhanger, if you've ever heard that term.

But my grandmother always told that story because he was talking politics in the street. This is a roundabout way to answer your question. My grandmother knew I was politically involved, and of all the family members, aside from my parents, you know, she took great pride in that. And she died shortly before I announced by candidacy for the legislature, and I kind of, it's kind of melancholy that she missed that because she just, you know, I, she was kind of influential in my

involvement I think, and we always talked politics. She hated Richard Nixon with a passion. And I was set to make my announcement almost a full year ahead of the general election and that, I was set to make my announcement, and that was the day Anwar Sadat was assassinated. So I put that off for a couple of days, it was very disturbing to me at that time. But in 1980 on November 10th I made my announcement to run for the legisla-, 1981, excuse me, to run for the legislature, and I was the Democratic primary opponent in 1982, and I won by twenty-one votes.

RR: Whoa, close race.

JH: Yeah, it was a close race, it had been a very close race. But nevertheless twenty is as good as two hundred, so I was elec-, won the primary, and then I had an opponent in the fall, a Republican an opponent and I ran that race and won every race for the legislature for the, through the next twelve years, and I lost my Democratic primary in 1994. As it turned out the house and senate were reapportioned, and the reapportionment plan went to the courts, and they pretty much adopted the Republican plan because it was a Republican, basically a Republican idea or centered court. The court adopted the Republican plan, and in looking at that plan the only two incumbents seeking reelection were myself and Georgette Berube, who both represented parts of Lewiston. And their plan made Lewiston, those two districts, come together so we were the only two in the state who were running for reelection, two incumbents running for reelection that were, were forced to run against each other because of the reapportionment plan. And she was very popular, her Franco-American name clearly carried her through in that election, you know, looking at Berube as opposed to Handy, and Franco-Americans vote. And, you know, I received some support, but clearly that and her popularity carried the day for her.

RR: What are your feelings about voter apathy in Maine?

JH: It, the issue of voter apathy here, it's very disturbing. And I think it's all an offshoot of, you know, in the sixties and even in the seventies many of my peers got involved. And I think that the apathy that we see, and we talk apathy now, I mean I'm just talking about people voting; I'm not even taking the step to people getting involved in political campaigns. People voting and, you know, just limiting apathy to looking at that, it's quite disturbing, and I think that's because they're, people haven't seen how, really don't realize how issues can affect them. I think there is certainly a disillusionment with the political process, and I think most of that is caused by the influence of money and political action money specifically in our campaigns. I think in, you know, I don't know what is greater, whether it's that there are no issues or whether it's people feel that they can't impact the system as we felt that we did or they just don't want to do the hard work that it takes to impact the system. And probably it's a little bit of all of those things.

In the sixties and seventies we were involved in issues, and issues drove the agenda, whether that was civil rights, the environment, or the war. I mean really I think those were the three major issues when I was growing up that really got people involved and people could relate to. When we went to the Reagan years the emphasis was on how much money am I going to make? And there was no emphasis on, you know, what can you contribute to society? You know, it's all what's in it for me kind of attitude that prevailed through the eighties at the federal level, and

there was no leadership to say, you know, we all have our responsibility to get involved. Not until, well, you got to give George Bush some credit for his Points of Light Foundation and emphasizing volunteerism.

RR: Father of Senior? George W. Bush or -?

JH: Yeah, senior, yeah his father. He emphasized that to some extent, but after going through the Reagan years and that emphasis on, you know, tax cuts and, you know, this early individualism that was so pervasive, I don't think the m-, I think the message was pretty much lost because Bush didn't come out as strongly as perhaps he could have in emphasizing that we have a contribution to be made to society. President Clinton has really made an effort to emphasize volunteerism and not just Points of Light Program and, you know, plaques up on people's walls but really truly emphasizing that service learning, Americorps, and that kind of involvement in your community pays dividends not only to yourself but to your community in which you live. So yeah, it's a, I don't know, I think we've, Clinton has kind of refocused us on that, but we have a long way to go.

And we've really got to do something about money in politics because, you know, I was a politician and I took PAC money, there's no question about it, but I also presented legislation to try to open up the process. When I was, in my first term in the legislature I got a major piece of legislation passed to require political action committees to report their contributions and their expenditures. In Maine they did not have to do that up until 1982, and that disclosure in and of itself, I mean that was the first step of what was a major step and really a significant accomplishment for a first term legislator. I worked very hard, I only presented, I only sponsored I think six bills my first term in the legislature, but it was important to me that, to limit that number so that we, so that I could focus on, you know, the prize rather than just have a number of bills that I sponsored, you know, a x-number of bills throughout this legislation because anyone can sponsor any number of bills; it's a matter of what you do to see them come to fruition.

RR: What would you say were personally your most fulfilling years in the legislature?

JH: Well, they all were fulfilling to varying degrees. I think, we had some rather tough struggles with worker's comp legislation. That closed down state government for a period of time. Those were really tough times and hard fought. If I had to be pinned down to something, I would say probably my two years in the senate. I was really challenged because I was, I never chaired a standing committee of the legislature in ten years in the house, and a lot of that went because of seniority. You're talking a hundred and fifty-one members and nineteen committees. There are just so many seats to go around, you know, sort of the ranking member of a couple of committees. But when I went to the senate with thirty-five senators and nineteen committees, everybody gets at least one committee assignment, and I was given three committee assignments and the chair of the labor committee. And the labor, I didn't ask to be chair of the labor committee, I asked to be chair of the education committee, but someone else was in line for that. I wanted to be on the labor committee, but I was asked to be on the labor, chair of the labor committee, aging, retirement, and veterans committee, and the legal affairs committee and that

committee pretty much handled what I call the vice issues, gambling, prostitution, alcohol, and then gun laws. It was most rewarding because I grew so much and I had a lot of challenges and I like a challenge, and I pretty much was able to I think be successful in managing the work of being on three, three committees.

On the labor committee, the significant aspect to that was in the term prior was the term that the legislature was shut down because Republicans wouldn't compromise on worker's comp., and it was known as an extremely volatile committee. Now the next legislature brought in some new people, but there wasn't a significant change in the labor committee particularly with the Republican membership of that committee, and I was asked to chair that. I think it was most fulfilling because I, I give myself and my co-chair credit for taking that committee, which was so volatile, and working toward compromise on some significant pieces of legislation. One was unemployment compensation fund solvency, which was a major issue, which we compromised on and settled on. But the piece of legislation I'm probably most proud of from the labor committee when I was chair was complete revision of the child labor laws and as they particularly relate to children's work and school and working. And there was some give and take but we made great strides in basically putting across the message that a student's first job is their education and not being in the work force. You know, they'll have their lifetime to do that. That's probably my most fulfilling time, my two years in the senate.

RR: Okay, I'm going to stop the tape right there, that's perfect timing, and just turn it over, okay?

JH: Good.

End of Side A
Side B

RR: This is side B of the interview with Jim Handy conducted on the 17th of July in the year 2000, interviewer being Robert Ruttmann. Mr. Handy, we just spoke of your most fulfilling time in the legislature, and I'd like to move on now to times when you actually interacted with Senator Muskie and you were involved with dealing with laws that you might both have had an interest in. Could you speak of any of those times that come to mind?

JH: Well, on several occasions we, I campaigned with Senator Muskie. I remember two occasions specifically where we stood at the gate at Bates Mill, the Bates Mill, and met the workers as they came out of the mill and basically urged the support of Senator Muskie. That was I believe in '72, and then also at another business that again we met workers and campaigned together. I was not running for office then, I was a volunteer. I never got paid for any Democratic campaign that I worked on and, only because it was something I believed in and I think it was important to volunteer in campaigns because that was for me a real important way of impacting our government, our political structure. So campaigning with Ed Muskie was a real treat and being a senior in high school, and I guess some people looked upon that as a pretty neat thing, that I got to campaign with Senator Muskie at that time. As far as issues I go back to environmental issues mostly. I started that environmental club at Lewiston High School, and as I

said the inspiration for that in large part because of Ed Muskie's leadership on clean water and clean air legislation and just kind of bringing it down to a local level and doing things for our community, whether that was picking up trash around the school on a regular basis or having rallies about environmental action, and stressing again the importance of getting involved in your community, in this case keeping it a livable community in terms of the environment.

RR: Did you, can you recall any personal dialogue that you had with him?

JH: I can't really recall any personal dialogue that I had with him. Always, usually the Saturday before Election Day, we would have a lit drop; we would go door-to-door dropping off brochures, and even after Senator Muskie left the senate and became secretary of state he would come to the small breakfast gathering we'd have. I shouldn't say small, we had a lot of volunteers there, the breakfast gathering that we would have on the Saturday before the election day and give us one of his stirring yet lengthy speeches, speeches, you know, of credit and thanks to motivate us to go and do the job that we're about to undertake in going door-to-door throughout this county actually. As for specifics, I can't recall anything specifically that we might have talked about off the top of my head anyway.

RR: What was he like as a public speaker?

JH: He was always a lengthy public speaker, so come prepared to stay, always come prepared to stay. But a really inspiring, you know, he can take the most mundane subject and make it interesting. A strong speaker and really got, you know, it might have taken him a long time to get to his, get to the point that he was trying to make, but nevertheless you felt energized and charged to go after any speech, whether that was a small gathering before a lit drop a weekend before the election, or whether it was at a state Democratic convention. You could always expect that you're going to leave there motivated and ready to do all that you can to elect Democrats.

RR: That's wonderful; that's really what you want from a politician.

JH: Yeah, exactly, exactly.

RR: What do you think was his best quality as a politician and possibly even as a person?

JH: Yeah, I mean, he's known for his temper, no question about that. And I don't think I was ever personally on the receiving end of that, fortunately, but even when giving a speech it was more than just his speaking style. You could know that he deeply felt what he was saying. I mean it was right from the heart, right from the heart and soul of Ed Muskie, and the messages that he delivered if he felt strongly about something he was coming across. Incredibly principled, maybe principled to a fault in that, I think that's probably a personal thing, that because he made up his mind on something and that was pretty much it, he was going with it.

I don't have any experience about, that I could, that I personally have the experience or related to, but I think it would be interesting to have some insight on how his colleagues in the senate

viewed him with respect to getting his support on legislation. What was their approach on either lobbying him if he had not yet made up his mind, or if he was holding a position opposite of someone else how they would try to get his support because he was such a strong personality. Learned, extraordinary public speaker, I mean just could speak so extemporaneously, he, and for long periods of time with showing great emotion and passion about whatever the subject was. Masterful, absolutely masterful in his public speaking skills.

RR: Wonderful. Now, the person behind the politician, you mentioned that he's very passionate about, the way you could sense his passion when he was up there. Do you think the person, that leads me to believe that the person was the politician. Would you agree with that assertion?

JH: Oh yeah, you know, politician through and through, and that's a good thing in a professional politician, and that's a good thing. I'd rather have a professional politician running the country than, as I would want a professional surgeon operating on me, I don't, you know, I don't want someone off the street, I want someone who knows what they're doing. Even if I disagree with them, if they're committed on principle, I can respect that I may disagree with the position one takes. But yeah, I think, you know, he came from very common means, you know. His father came from Poland, and, you know, that has to have a lot to do with, this may be profound, but it has to have a lot to do with the kind of person he is inasmuch as his passion and commitment and his stand on principle. You know, just as my grandparents came to this country and worked very hard for what they got Ed Muskie's father had to have had the same experience coming from the old country and getting started, you know, and raising a family. I think those, I think when people experience the struggle, and I'm not saying everybody needs to experience struggle, but when you experience struggle, you develop whatever's inside of you to be passionate about things, and I think that's my insight as to how he might have developed that person. I think it was there, and it just and just come out in him as a leader in this country.

RR: I think that's a very insightful observation. Do you remember the, in 1972 when he, the incident when he allegedly cried. You were eighteen years old at the time.

JH: I remember it very well.

RR: What are your impressions of that incident?

JH: Well, as far as the crying goes, I guess at that time, even when I was being raised, I remember my parents saying, you know, "Big boys don't cry." That, you know, through those younger years really, you know, had that impression with me, but I was always the rebel in my family anyway, so it didn't leave any indelible scars on me, so I was never afraid to show my emotions whether that be laughter or crying. You know, I think most people would agree and say he was crying, other people will say, well, it was the snow and he was wiping the snow off his face. Well, if he was crying, it was no big deal to me at the time. And, you know, from that kind of looking at, directly at Ed Muskie and did he cry, should he cry, it, if he felt a reason to emote then so be it. And then the other part of me is saying, you know, damn Richard Nixon, you know, dirty tricks throughout the whole campaign and the New Hampshire *Union Leader*

and all of that stuff, it was such a ganging-up on an individual and exploiting, you know, either his emotional state of mind or just for their own political gains. My grandmother, my father's mother, was livid when Nixon did that because she remembered the Teapot Dome scandal when Nixon was in the senate and, you know, the furs and the dog and all that stuff.

RR: Yeah, it really was insidious, from what I've read. I mean, I wasn't alive at the time, but from what I've read it just, it really kind of makes your skin crawl.

JH: It does, exactly.

RR: I'd like to talk a little bit more about Vietnam and what you think Muskie's stance was during the time and possible how his, how the statements might have evolved over the time.

JH: Yeah, as I recall Muskie, well, Gene McCarthy, I think, forced that to the top in '68 as a priority, the primary presidential issue and opposing the war, really the first, I think, first presidential candidate who came out strongly against the war as anyone ever had to that point. And, you know, the four years beginning in '68 and '72 I think were watershed years for politicians coming around to that, that final position that the war needed to come to an end. I don't recall Ed Muskie as being a leader in that but finally arrived at that decision I think pretty much in the way of, that most politicians of the time arrived at it. It was a slow process for most politicians but finally came to that realization.

RR: Do you think it was party loyalty that kept him from making the, making the decision a little bit more immediately?

JH: Yeah, I mean, you know, he was Muskie's running mate, I mean Humphrey's running mate then, and, you know, it was I think probably, I wouldn't be surprised, and I don't have any evidence to prove or disprove this, but I wouldn't be surprised if he felt that it was the wrong thing to do long before he could verbalize it. And I think in large part too he being recognized as an American political leader at the time with potential to be president and certainly his relationship with Humphrey. I think Humphrey arrived at the decision long before Muskie did or at least was prepared to speak out against the war. So yeah, I think party position had a lot to do with, and Ed Muskie's position, had a lot to do with his coming around quite a little bit later than other people did.

RR: Partisanship in politics, do you think it's improved or do you think it's escalated I should say, or no?

JH: Well, I mean, yeah, to me there's no greater process than the process that we have. We have a strong two major party system. I shouldn't, let me retract that, I don't think it's as strong as it used to be, you know, in the sixties certainly or in the seventies. We have a two party system that allows for the people to be involved to the degree that they choose to get involved. They need to be more involved in it. And I wouldn't trade that for anything. Partisanship, I think you're, that's to be expected in a party system such as that which we have, and I think that's okay. If you take partisanship to the extent where it becomes a, it becomes a, the dogma

where it's only the Democrats have the good ideas, only Democrats can make this country right, only Democrats and conversely Republicans in the same manner can contribute, or it's the right approach to anything. I think that's when we begin to hurt ourselves with partisanship. And I'm as partisan a Democrat as you'll find anywhere. I think Democrats often have the better ideas, often have, but that's not to the exclusion of ideas that Republicans might bring to the table. I think, I think . . . . Newt Gingrich has been gone for about a year and a half now. He really epitomized creating a divisive partisanship, partisanism, not only in the congress but through the country, and it was really pernicious in every way. That was not good for the political system. I don't think anybody has a monopoly on good ideas, no party has a monopoly on good ideas, there can be good ideas all around. I think you need to be open to that.

Has it gotten worse? Yeah, I think what this country really needs is, and I'd like to say a Democrat, but at the risk of making a wish for Republicans, what this country kind of needs is perhaps a (*interrupted by knocking on door*). I guess what I'm, we've had, you know, a congress that's been different from the party in the White House and, you know, I'd like to see it be Democrat, I mean (*unintelligible phrase*), but I'd like to see it happen where congress is of the same party as the White House. If it's Democrat, then I think we can go a long way toward making some great achievements, even greater than President Clinton's. If it's Republican, I think it will, it will really show in a very clear way the directions that Republicans want to lead this country. And, you know it, people forget that, you know, what happens when you have one party dominating. It's all that way. And if that were to happen, it might, it might be kind of a wake up call to folks that you've got to get involved, and if you don't like the way things are running you've got to change your congress, you've got to change the White House, you've got to have, you got to have people there who are willing to make compromises.

And people can compromise on issues; they don't have to compromise on principle. I think Ed Muskie understood that very well. I don't think the modern day politician in Washington really understands the importance of compromise in getting, trying to make achievements based on, you know, what, based on fact and based on what the electorate wants. Prescription drugs is a classic example. It's very, to me it's a very clear issue. How you get there is maybe, maybe up for debate, but Republicans certainly don't accept the fact that people need to have control of their medicine, they don't understand that you need a patient bill of rights that allows doctors to doctor and insurance companies to do whatever they do, rather than having insurance companies doctor. In either case it can bring to light for people that, you know, we got to have more cooperation and people want to stand on principle and not on how much money they're going to get from the prescription drug companies and that kind of thing for the next election.

RR: Is there presently within a contemporary political contingent, national contingent, is there a person that you could say is similar to Muskie or someone that might remind you of Muskie in the way that you (*unintelligible phrase*)?

JH: Yeah, actually there is. I think Bill Bradley. I think, clearly physical stature alone is probably enough, but I've kind of been a Bradley watcher for all the time that he's spent in the senate. He stands on principle; he's not afraid to compromise. I see him, he's similar in those ways to Ed Muskie.

RR: In terms of his beliefs, compromise -?

JH: Well, beliefs, in compromise, even on issues I think that they're probably pretty closely aligned, environmental issues particularly.

RR: It's a fine line I think between I think, as I read Muskie's book, I think a lot of people accused him of sometimes, you know, procrastinating whereas others on the other side of the spectrum might have said that he was a master, as you have illustrated, he was a master of compromise. And I think it's kind of delicate balance there.

JH: I think it is a delicate balance. There are few people, I think, that can lay claim to being able to do that, and I think Muskie was so extraordinarily good at it that he left people thinking that they got something out of it, you know, and he forged a compromise, you know, he was willing to compromise, but he wasn't going to give the store away. And I do think that oftentimes he did procrastinate and was reticent to get out on a limb from time to time. But by the same token there were some issues where we would not have, be where we are in terms of our environment if it wasn't for Ed Muskie. And I think that's undisputed. I mean, we feel the effects of his work today, you know, we have much more emphasis put on the environment.

I mean, if you, I can't imagine, you know the Androscoggin River was on the top ten list of dirtiest rivers in the country when I was growing up, and the fumes that would emanate from that river would take the paint off buildings along the river. And Ed Muskie, you know, he experienced that, you know, you know, when he lived in Rumford. He understood that, you know, the river is a place that was integral to people's livelihood but not to the exclusion of the importance that people placed in having a clean river for recreation or for economic development in that, from that standpoint. Who wants to move in the middle of town where there's a filthy river? Now, I wouldn't eat any fish out of that river right now, that's for sure, because there are still companies that find their waste products going into it. But can you imagine where we would be with respect to that river, with respect to our air, or with respect to the clean water drinking act if it wasn't for Ed Muskie?

RR: It's amazing, actually, how he was able to really balance his passionate side with this ability to listen, you know, and to maintain his passion, maintain his conviction and at the same time listen to another person's point of view and try and understand, like, kind of seek first to understand, you know. And I think that's really a mark of a great man.

JH: There are very few people in my lifetime that I can look back and say he was, apply the word statesman. You know, and particularly from Maine, who comes to mind? George Mitchell and Ed Muskie. Those, you know, and I don't even put people like Bill Cohen in that category because I think that, you know, they're just not that, Margaret Chase Smith is not in that category. I mean, she makes one speech on the floor of the senate that captures the attention of the world and that somehow makes her this statesperson. And yeah, I mentioned two Democrats, but I'm trying to look at this from, you know, a scientific point of view. The contributions of Ed Muskie and the contributions of George Mitchell far exceed the contributions of anyone in this

state.

RR: You mentioned that she made some renowned (*unintelligible word*) speech. What is that in regard to?

JH: That was -

RR: Margaret Chase Smith.

JH: That was in regard to McCarthy and the Red menace that he was alleging that was pervading our society, and came out strongly, you know a Republican woman came out strongly against that. Which is great, and I credit her for that. That, you know, that's great, but I don't think one issue or one event makes one a statesperson. Yes, she was a senator from Maine, and she made a contribution, and she should be accorded credit for that.

RR: What is your idea on third party, the importance of a third party in a state political system?

JH: Well, you know, I have mixed feelings about third parties. You know, I believe in a strong two party system. But if that two party system is not being responsive to people then it needs to be challenged, it needs to, you know, I think that's important, to challenge the process. I get the feeling that people who involve themselves in third parties are in a large part maybe upset because they don't agree with either of the two major parties on a handful or less of the issues, or it's, you know, it's to spite the system, you know. That's the way I was when I was growing up, I mean it was kind of out of the mainstream perhaps, maybe extremely far to the left. But in terms of their viability, I don't think third parties are viable. Part of that is because of our structure of campaign, and so long as third parties are excluded by the structure of campaign funding, so long as you don't have a system that funds public campaigns, then they don't stand a chance.

Would I like to see a third party? Not particularly, because I think that no one's, no matter who you are, you're not going to be able to be a member of a party and say that you agree with everything that party stands for. Just as there are Democrats who support campaign finance reform there are Republicans who support campaign finance reform. I think some third party, people who would advocate third parties are naive in thinking that they are going to agree with them on every issue, and then they end up leaving that party, and we've seen that with the Reform party, you know, and their struggles. People expect, people who come into, some people who come into those parties expect that things are going to be this way. But it's not a black and white world, and the parties are certainly not black and white; they're many, many shades of grey. So I don't see a lot of viability for third parties, not in the next fifty years probably.

RR: Who do you think, which party, which side of the spectrum if the one side is Republican and the other is Democrat, which side of the spectrum does the existence of a third party affect most do you think?

JH: Well, you know, I also find third party advocates as being very fickle. I think if you have can-, let's, let's take, compare Pat Buchanan and a Ralph Nader, for example. Both come from extreme, if you had to classify them as Democrat or Republican it would come from the extremes on both sides. So in that, in that regard Ralph Nader will take away support from the Democratic Party, Pat Buchanan will take away support from the Republican Party, but probably less of it, but probably less of it. And the reason I say that is Democrats are more willing to accept the fact that there are other people who might have something to contribute to the political dialogue, whereas I think the Republicans who support the apparent nominee of their party, George [W] Bush, tend not to want to be extreme, so, and they want to go with it. I think they're more inclined to be, go with a sure thing, whereas Democrats, well, they would, they're more likely to jump, jump and vote for a third party candidate, and Republicans I think are less likely to.

RR: Do you think it might hurt the Democratic Party in the November election?

JH: To some degree but I don't think to the degree that other political pundits are suggesting that it will. I don't think, I think that people who vote for the most part remember Ralph Nader as a consumer advocate, and I applaud many of the positions that he's taken, but I think one also has to consider the electability, I think you have to consider electability, and I'd be the last person to say, "If you're voting for Nader you're throwing away your vote," but the fact of the matter is you go for Ralph Nader and you get something even worse, you get George Bush. So I think that has to be factored in when one makes a decision as to, you know, if they should support a third party candidate, what are the ramifications of that further down the road?

RR: Do you think people working for Ralph Nader, do you think they realize this?

JH: No, because I think that, I think that in many cases it's a very dogmatic point of view. I mean they see things with tunnel vision, and that's all that they see. You know, I probably would have been the same way, being a lot younger. I mean I'm, and I have voted for candidates who I know aren't, don't stand a chance of winning because I believe in that candidate, but that's based on a principle not so much as a dogma that's been developed because you've been wronged by the Democrats or been wronged by the Republicans. I think it's okay to have that different point of view, but I think you really got to keep the reality in focus.

RR: Nader has actually been around for quite some time. He's actually at odds with Muskie.

JH: Yes.

RR: Do you recall any of those interactions?

JH: Well, I mean, Ralph Nader's been to the left, extreme left of center for a long time. And I have too, but probably not as far out there as Ralph Nader has. I mean, that's, I mean that's got to be part of the consideration if you're going to support somebody. You know, does he stand a chance of being elected? Or ask yourself the question what do I want from my government in the next four years? Is Ralph Nader going to be able to provide that? Well, there's not going to be a

third party congress, there's not going to be a third party house or a third party senate for that matter in either case. So where does that put Ralph Nader? Does he have the political astuteness and wherewithal to, if he were to be elected president, to convince a Republican house and a Democratic senate or Republicans or all Democrats, whatever the makeup might be, to see things his way? What would happen, I think, is you basically end up with a parliamentary form of government with an executive that is -

RR: Almost powerless.

JH: Powerless, absolutely powerless, which would not be good for this country. I think you need to have the three branches of government that provide the system of checks and balances that we have.

RR: So in essence, really, the function that an independent party will, nationally speaking now, if I understand correctly, the function that the party is executing is really just to bolster the viability of the Bush campaign.

JH: I think that would be, the net result would be making Bush all the more viable. You know, I'll acknowledge that we need, and this is because of my left of center point of view, we as Democrats need to really look at issues that are being raised across the political spectrum carefully, and they need to be concerned with equal weight in the dialogue. Maybe they don't come to fruition, but I think part of the issue is people just don't feel like they're being heard. And I think if you address that, then you could bring some people back to the party.

RR: Well, I think we've pretty much come to the conclusion of the interview with the exception of like two or three questions that I'd like to ask you.

JH: Sure.

RR: First of all being, do you remember, and I know this, I know Senator Muskie was quite a bit before your time, but I thought I might ask this question anyways. Really a, like kind of anecdotal story that might illustrate Senator Muskie's sense of humor, or did, from your experience did, was he a lot more kind of reticent in terms of expressing a sense of humor?

JH: I don't have any particular story I recall, but I al-, he always interjected humor in whatever speech he was giving. He struck the balance of getting his message across in no uncertain terms, and part of that success was interjecting humor from time to time. I think every speech I ever heard him give he started off with a joke, which is a classic, you know, technique in public speaking. There was some joke about a cow that he told, and I can't remember it, but there was a joke about a cow someplace. And it was at one of those pre lit-drop rallies. I distinctly remember something about a cow, but I can't remember anything more.

RR: Okay, well, I mean, unless you have anything to add? Do you have anything that you might want to add?

JH: I don't know, we covered the landscape I think.

RR: Yeah?

JH: Yeah.

RR: I'm going to ask you one more thing just before concluding. What's the best book you've ever read or maybe even just most recently the best book that you've read about Muskie?

JH: The most recent book I read is called Evidence From Beyond, and it's an interesting story about what is reported to happen in the afterlife. And I particularly enjoyed this book because it was just written in such a down-to-earth form, and it's about the, I can't remember if it's his daughter or his wife, but this minister by the name of A. D. Mattson, who died and has communicated to his, again daughter or wife, I'm a blank now here, about his experiences on, you know, in life after death. I find it absolutely fascinating. A.D. Mattson was, in his ministry, a person who always fought for the underdog. He (*unintelligible word*) on picket lines helping demonstrate for labor unions, he really championed the causes of people who face discrimination, because of racial discrimination or sexual orientation, and that was a long time ago. And he speaks through his relative, through a person that's famous in England as a channeler to channel these thoughts. It's kind of out there, but I really was quite fascinated by that book. George Mitchell's book, Men of Zeal, about the Iran -

RR: What is it called?

JH: Men of Zeal.

RR: Men of Zeal.

JH: About the Iran Contra hearings. That was a very interesting book.

RR: And one more.

JH: And one more?

RR: (*Unintelligible phrase*).

JH: One more book. A book that left a real big impression with me is called Face Behind the Mask, and it was about this person who was striving to become a professional ball umpire. I think his name was Ron Palone, and he, he was gay, and he had to deal with the discrimination that he personally faced while trying to break into the field of umpiring in baseball in the minor leagues and then in, subsequently trying to break into the major leagues. It was quite a story about his struggle.

RR: Yeah that is, I'm sure that must be interesting. Especially in such a kind of macho dominated industry, a sport.

JH: Exactly. It was exactly that, and the, I think it just speaks to, we can do all we can to pass laws to have these protections, and we should continue to do that, but it's changing the psyche of society as a whole that we need to go through to just accept people for who they are and what they can contribute to society.

RR: And it's happening but I think in this country, I think this country, I was saying to a friend of mine recently that this country is really a country that's becoming one to embrace diversity, but it's happening very slowly, and it's going to take a lot longer. I mean, you still see so much discrimination.

JH: You do.

RR: Where people discriminate against external features or preferences rather than the person, you know, the nature of the person, you know. And I think people are becoming more conscious, more aware and more compassionate, I think.

JH: I think so. It's slowly, I was, as you were saying that I was thinking about during the sixties and discrimination against people of color, and I almost think that we've made bigger strides in our efforts to eliminate discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. And probably the distinguishing factor there is that you can see if there is a person of color in front of you; you're not always aware that a lesbian or a gay person is in front of you, you know, so that is part of that. So I think people are, they can maybe rationalize it in their head a little bit, you know, it's not out there for me so I don't have to, it's okay. But nevertheless there's still discrimination that exists for gay, our gay people and our society as a whole. And I feel so strongly that, you know, we just need to, no one's asking you to do anything but tolerate, tolerate one's differences. You know?

RR: I'm going to bring that to a close right there. Thank you very much for conducting the interview.

JH: It's been a pleasure.

End of Interview