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Isaacson, Phil oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

Interview with Phil Isaacson by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee
Isaacson, Phil

Interviewer
L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date
June 23, 1999

Place
Lewiston, Maine

ID Number
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Biographical Note

Phil Isaacson was born in Lewiston, Maine on June 19, 1924. He attended Lewiston primary schools. He spent his first two years of high school at Lewiston High School and his second two at Hebron Academy. He attended Bates College where he was a part of the V-12 naval officer's program. He was in the Navy from the tail end of World War II until 1946. He returned to Bates and graduated in 1947. He then entered Harvard Law School where he concentrated on corporate law. He practiced law with his father for almost 25 years. He served on the Lewiston Board of Finance and as Corporation Counsel under Malenfant, Rancourt, and Beliveau. He was also the Assistant County Attorney.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: 1952-1954 Maine Democratic Party; 1954 Maine gubernatorial campaign; 1958 U.S. Senate campaign; 1960 Kennedy-Johnson Presidential campaign; Republican Party in Maine; Democratic Party in Maine; Lewiston community history; social clubs as political arenas; clubs as a source of man power for campaigns; new city charter; corporate counsel; Lewiston mayors in the 1950s; Bobby Clifford's take on the new charter; Judge of probate; the campaign manager for John C. Donovan; Muskie anecdote; Louis Jalbert's referral to himself as "Mr. Democrat"; and Louis Brann with Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932.

Indexed Names

Beliveau, Albert
Beliveau, John
Brann, Louis
Chamberlain, Joshua Lawrence, 1828-1914
Clifford, William H.
Clifford, Robert
Clifford, Jere
Clifford, John, Jr.
Coffin, Frank Morey
Cohen, William S.
Cote, Adrian A.
Couture, Faust
Couture, Paul
Cross, Burton
Donovan, John C.
Fullam, Paul
Gagne, Louis-Philippe
Isaacson, Irving
Isaacson, Peter
Isaacson, Phil
Jacques, Emile "Bill"
Jalbert, Louis
Kennedy, John F. (John Fitzgerald), 1917-1963
King, Stephen, 1947-
Lee, Shep
Lessard, Al
Malenfant, Ernest
Marcotte, Roland
Muskie, Edmund S., 1914-1996
Muskie, Jane Gray
Pelletier, Larry
Rancourt, Georges
Raymond, Larry
Rocheleau, Bill
Roosevelt, Franklin D. (Franklin Delano), 1882-1945
Sadik, Marvin
Tupper, Stanley

Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Phil Isaacson on June 23rd, 1999 at his office

in Lewiston, Maine at 75 Park Street at 4:00 PM. Mr. Isaacson, we were just starting to talk about some of the clubs in town that also had political bases.

Phil Isaacson: Yeah, I think virtually all of them were used politically in one way or another. And although they were non-profit clubs they were functionally if not, if not formally, owned by people. And those owners were, or the operators at least, (I don't think it's really accurate to call them owners), but the operators, those people who really ran the clubs, often in the physical sense and certainly in a philosophic sense, were politicians, and very often elected officials, I mean often elected officials. And the one that comes closest, the easiest to my mind is the 20M Club on Lincoln Street in Lewiston. It's on the westerly side of the street not very far from Cedar Street. And I think it's still ongoing. It was founded by Paul Couture, Paul A. Couture, and Paul used the term 20M because it stood for "twenty men." Of course the club proved to be a lot larger than that. Well Paul used that club as an agency for his election as the alderman from the, that ward, and once to become a county commissioner. So these are the people that went out and, you know, knocked on the doors, put up his signs, spoke to their friends and made sure that Paul would handily get reelected. And of course he did it year after year after year. There were annual elections originally, and he did it year after year.

So the clubs had very real political bias in the days when Lewiston had a very robust political culture. Of course we have no political culture now; it's almost impossible to get people to accept positions in any of the commissions. There are two openings now in the Lewiston Planning Board and they can't find anyone who wants to be on it. No, Lewiston Board of Appeals. And the mayors had a very hard time during the heyday of Paul Couture and others which I recall, the '50s and '60s, when people stood in line to get those, any of the Lewiston boards and commissions. But yeah, they were very, they were political strongholds. There was another club in Paul's ward called the Pastant Club. I don't think it ever had, well I know it never had the influence that, that the 20M Club had, even though the Pastant was actually in Little Canada, whereas the 20M Club was on the periphery of Little Canada, but really not very far from. . . . I mean it was, I think the, it backed up on St. Mary's Church and St. Mary's Church was of course the church for the Little Canada area parish.

There were other clubs. There was the Acme Aroostook Club and, oh gosh, the name of the activist there doesn't come to me quickly, but he used the Acme Aroostook as a political agency. The Club Franco-Americain, or the Franco-American Club, was the Republican club for the city of Lewiston. And so the Republican activists, one of whom was an attorney, the late Adrian A. Cote was very active. But there are not a lot of French-Canadian, Franco-American Republicans. But to the extent that there were any, they gravitated around that club, and that was a seat of power. So the clubs were important.

Whenever there was an election, whether it was a municipal election or an election even on a national level, there was a great deal of activity in those clubs. And it was a, it was standard procedure for a candidate to come into town and someone take them around to the clubs, and someone at each club be ready to receive him and introduce him. I thought it was awfully, it was very interesting. I don't know to what extent that happens now. I think not a lot, if at all. The, under the old charter the political climate in Lewiston was always boiling. It never cooled down because we've had, as I remember, yeah, of course, we had annual elections. So by the time you

geared up for an election, got yourself in office, got the structure going, you were gearing up again for the next election. So things never calmed down; they really never did calm down.

AL: Do you think the change in people wanting to participate in government is the change in the charter and the type of government that this town has?

PI: Well yeah, it's because you had a hands-on government before. It gave citizens an opportunity to play a direct role in the government. Now that, in a sense of civics is really excellent, but in the sense of efficiency and long-range planning it couldn't be worse. And it showed up in the progress that Lewiston made in virtually all areas- our progress was exceedingly slow and badly conservative. Once the charter got changed, people lost the interest pretty much in local politics, at least on a relative base, and that is to say, compared to what it had been under the other charter. But of course the quality of municipal services and the sophistication of those services are measurably, immeasurably higher now than they were before. The fact of the matter is that politics really shouldn't play much of a role in how the trash is collected or how fires are attended to. I mean those are administrative functions and really don't need much input from the voters on how those things should be done, so. Of course, Lewiston's a much better community in that respect than it was. However, there is not a lot of interest in the government of the community; there's apathy now.

AL: Louis Jalbert.

PI: Who?

AL: Louis Jalbert.

PI: Louis Jalbert, oh yes.

AL: Could you tell me a little about your impressions of him?

PI: Well, oh he was, of course, a swashbuckler. Louis ran for mayor against Ernest Malenfant in about 1952. I think that's pretty accurate; certainly accurate within a year. He would not have run if he didn't think that he was, going to win. And he was not only defeated but he was decisively defeated by a gate crossing tender, who was very close to illiterate, very, very close to illiterate. And as it was often said of Ernest Malenfant, he could speak neither French nor English; his English was atrocious and his French was as bad or worse. But Louis in the eyes of the voters as a whole represented a certain clique in Lewiston politics, and Malenfant very shrewdly played that up. And he used the resentment against that clique to defeat Jalbert. And plus, I think Jalbert's own reputation didn't do him a great deal of good. In the greater community, he was able to very successfully of course get himself elected to the legislature, but not on a city-wide basis but on a much more restrictive voter basis. He got elected to the legislature and the way he was able to do that was to push for bullets. Do you know what a bullet is? If there's six people running and you say "Vote for me and don't vote for the others," it's almost the equivalent of giving me six votes, so he would get people to bullet and bullet and bullet, and bullet. And so you're not, if there's six people running, you're not, you weren't required to vote for, if there was six offices to be filled, (I think that's how I should have said it),

you were not required to vote for a candidate for each of the offices; you'd just vote for Louis. And that put him ahead of the other five.

AL: What part of Lewiston did he represent?

PI: Did Louis represent? It would be between College and Main Streets from say Sabattus Street to, maybe pretty close to the fairgrounds. It would run along the easterly edge of Main Street. And he had a lot, he had a good solid. . . . And he was of course an extraordinarily adept politician, and he earned votes by getting things done for, getting things done for people. It wasn't always good, it wasn't always good for society but he got things done. He got legislation passed that was sometimes pretty bad legislation, sometimes terrible legislation. But he was able to do it.

AL: Did you ever interact with him on a one-to-one basis in the city government?

PI: Well I, I mean Ernest Malenfant, I was Ernest Malenfant's corporation counsel. What that meant. . . .

AL: Oh, tell me about that.

PI: So that meant that I came head-to-head with Jalbert. You know, he had a reputation of being a rogue of course, and, in politics, and politics really were, you know, was his life. And as a result he was extremely shrewd and very dangerous; I mean, a, as a political opponent. And he was a one hundred percent political animal so that he, he was dealing with politics in his mind day and night. And he had a tremendous amount of experience and understood the system perfectly. And as to how he used the system, well, I mean you see it in the United, you see people in the United States Congress the same way. You see some of these Southern representatives, members of the House who have been there for years and years and years; I mean they know how to use the system.

And Louis was very shrewd. When someone would get elected from Lewiston, he'd take him under his wing and he'd take him up to Augusta and he'd show him around and he'd tell him how the system worked. And he said, "I'll help you with voting. You know, if you don't understand the bill I'll explain the bill to you." And so Louis had a tremendous amount of influence over unsophisticated members of the House, perhaps even the Senate. Louis was, but there, there isn't the climate any more for another Louis. He could only exist I think under the old charter. Not that he held local office, but that the old charter kept politics at a very high level, that is to say, it kept the interest in politics at a very high level; And when people are interested in politics, Louis could be effective. If they weren't interested in politics, they perhaps wouldn't even bother to vote, and Louis wouldn't be effective at all.

AL: What was it like being Ernest Malenfant's corporation counsel?

PI: Well, what was it like? You felt a very real responsibility to the city under Ernest, because you had to make sure that he understood what the issues were. And he didn't always understand the issues, so you had to work very hard to, you had to be an activist, you know, proactive for

Ernest. Corporation counsel today is called the city attorney and he's just a lawyer, and if he's called upon for an opinion on any subject, he would, will render an opinion. But in those days, corporation counsel was, you know, attended every meeting of the city council, often meetings of boards, frequently had to go to the mayor's office to deal with matters, (not simply political matters, in behalf of the mayor, well there was inevitably some of that under the old charter), but to make sure that the mayor understood things. And you don't need that any more. With the city administrator it's absolutely unnecessary.

So, it was very interesting certainly. He was a nice man, except that his experience as a gate crossing tender naturally limited horizons and he was utterly without sophistication. And so, the burden of the corporation was more than just to give opinions to the city and represent the city in various ways. The burden really was to be an administrative assistant to the mayor, confidant of the mayor and make sure that the mayor understood what the mayor was doing. That was a problem with Ernest Malenfant. Incidentally, I was not the first. Ernest Malenfant had been elected once before me, and Frank Coffin, who later became Judge Frank Coffin, was Ernest's corporation counsel. Am I right? Yeah, sure. It went, Frank Coffin, Ernest was elected. . . .

AL: Wait, who was in between?

PI: . . . . and then it would have been Roland Marcotte. Yeah, Ernest got elected. Frank Coffin was his corporation counsel. Ernest failed to get reelected, then Roland Marcotte was probably in for two years. By that time I would think we must be up to about 1952. Then Ernest ran, he defeated Louis Jalbert, a very formidable candidate of course, and he was a professional politician working night and day in his own behalf in politics. I don't even know what his, what his indicated source of livelihood was. I think he might have been a salesperson for maybe construction equipment, road construction or something, it wasn't, it wasn't apparent.

So Ernest defeated him and that, and then Judge Alton Lessard ran against him. So, Lessard later, I think Lessard ultimately got to look down at the law court. Maybe he didn't, but he certainly got to be a Superior Court judge. But in any event, Lessard ran against him, he defeated Lessard. And that was the end of Ernest because you could only have two years. Then Georges, that's G-E-O-R-G-E-S, Georges Rancourt, you probably know that, Georges Rancourt ran and he was elected for two years, and I was his corporation counsel. And Rancourt was a janitor at the old Frye School in Lewiston, and he shoveled coal.

AL: Is he still living?

PI: Georges passed away.

AL: He did? Okay.

PI: Yeah. And he was not as politically astute as Ernest, because Ernest, he lived politics as well. But Georges worked very, very hard to be a good mayor, he tried very hard. I think he had very good instincts, better instincts than Ernest had because Ernest was by nature a distrusting person. He didn't trust things or people, or me. Oh, Ernest was something else. But Georges Rancourt, was a, not a cynical person; he was an optimistic person, and tried very hard to bring a

more enlightened attitude to the city. He was intelligent. He was an example of somebody, you know, whose intelligence exceeded what his ambition was. After that I think Marcotte came back for a couple of years; I'm not so sure. No, it might have been Bill Jacques. I think it was Bill Jacques. Anyhow, there was a succession of up and down mayors for a long time after that. Had some good mayors after that under the new charter. Bobby Clifford was an excellent mayor, John Beliveau was an excellent mayor.

AL: Is John Beliveau related to the late Albert Beliveau?

PI: No, it's a different, no, no, John Beliveau's father was a doctor. And John's a judge now, right next door, yeah. You ought to speak to John.

AL: Would he have knowledge of that time period, yeah, yeah?

PI: Sure. Yeah, probably not, like, in the same, as profound as mine because he didn't, well, not, I don't think mine is profound, but anyhow, he didn't come back to Lewiston until maybe the mid-fifties. So the roaring early fifties were over by then. I was John, John Beliveau got to be mayor and I was his corporation counsel. So, yeah, I was elected corporation counsel under various mayors.

AL: So you got out of the service in '46. You'd already done some schooling at Bates, and you came back to Bates. How, what year did you graduate from Bates?

PI: Forty-seven.

AL: Forty-seven. Then you went on to Harvard Law School?

PI: Yeah.

AL: And, what, three years?

PI: Three years.

AL: So you were back here in '50.

PI: Right.

AL: So you were here for the roaring early fifties.

PI: Oh, walked right into it. I walked right into politics, and it was a natural for me to do it, because it's fascinating. I mean it's really hands-on politics on the person-to-person level. So I mean, when you're out looking for votes, you are really out shaking people's hands and saying "Vote for Ernest Malenfant. He's got good instincts." It was terrific.

AL: So when Ed Muskie ran for governor, had you met him prior to that?

PI: Yeah. I met him when he was running in '54. He ran in '54, was elected for governor in '54, and I met him when he was running. He was a Bates graduate; very hardworking, ambitious young man. And in fact, I think while he was running I actually inherited one of his clients that he actually sent on to me, or something. Sure, I had met him. But I didn't know Muskie in any sense in the way that Sheppie Lee knew Muskie, or Marvin Sadik. If you want to deal with Muskie, you really ought to talk to Marvin Sadik, too. You'll get a whole other slant, a slant from someone who saw Muskie through the eyes of Washington. Marvin Sadik lives at Prout's Neck in Scarborough, and you could contact him simply by calling him. See Marvin Sadik, I don't know if he was a pall bearer at Muskie's funeral, he might have been, but he was certainly invited to the funeral. He might have been a pall bearer; I'm not sure of that. So Marvin knew Muskie, you know, quite well, and knew him from an entirely different perspective than the people in Maine knew him, which would be good. Of course, Sheppie Lee knew him from every respect.

AL: What capacity. . . .?

PI: Sheppie, Sheppie was with him from day one. I don't think anybody would, well, I don't know who's got the most information about Muskie. But certainly Shepherd's got a lot of it. You've already interviewed Shep Lee, anyway.

AL: A couple of times. We'll probably do it another time.

PI: Well, Sheppie's more politic than I am. He probably won't speak as, no, I don't, he might speak more abruptly than I think he would.

AL: I'd be interested to know what the climate was in Lewiston as the campaign, Muskie for governor, built a momentum, especially in such a Democratic. . . .

PI: Disbelief, really. It began to be apparent towards that the end that young man from Waterville could win.

AL: A Democrat.

PI: Yeah. But I think, my recollection was, and I may be wrong about this, that the Republican Party had split within itself. And Muskie got elected to some extent, and maybe to a substantial extent, on the fact that the Republican primary was a very, very, what is it? The primary was very contentious. And I don't think after the primary that the party healed itself. And because of that happening, I suspect, well I think it had to be so, but a lot of Republicans voted for Muskie. I mean I haven't ever analyzed the vote, but it seems to me that I've been told that he got in because the Republicans voted for him. And that was a way of showing that they were opposed to the, their own, the, you know, the candidate that the party had nominated. I'm trying to think of who it was. It was the, the Republicans, the disaffected people wanted a very nice guy down in York County; what was his name?

AL: He just passed away very recently. Well, I'm not thinking of his name right now, but anyways he was an incumbent. He was running for reelection . . .

PI: Yeah, George. . . .

AL: . . . . and he did just all, apparently all the wrong things.

PI: I'm just trying to think of. . . . Anyhow, the Republicans split and who did Muskie run against and defeat? Isn't that awful? But anyhow. Who did he? Oh, gosh, I don't know.

AL: Burt Cross (*unintelligible word*). . . .

PI: You have it more accurately than I do. I really didn't know Burt. I knew Burt's brother. What a terrific fellow, lived in Brunswick. And I've forgotten his name. He was a book dealer, a dealer in not rare books but scarce books. And he was a specialist in books on mountaineering, mountain climbing, and his reputation was national and even international. He was an awfully nice guy. I didn't know Burt Cross. But Burt Cross, my impression was, was in the great tradition of Republican governors that had been in office for decades. And the tide really was against people like Burt Cross, because the days of the good old boys in every sense in Maine was coming to an end. And Burt Cross certainly was one of the good old boys of his day. So, I think there was a split within the Republican Party. I can't remember the name of the fellow in York County who ran against Burt in the primary; didn't win. And there was a split and it never got repaired. Anyhow, it's one of the best things that ever happened to the state of Maine was the fact that Burt Cross got defeated; not that necessarily that it was, that Burt himself got out of office, but that Muskie came into office, because then, so. There was a new wind blowing, and it really blew all the dried leaves away, and the state has never been the same since then. It's changed dramatically. It's. . . .

AL: You were talking a little bit about the new charter. What was your role in the formation of the new charter? Were you involved in that (*unintelligible word*)?

PI: I was only peripherally involved. They wouldn't let me get involved. And I was deliberately excluded because Bobby Clifford had told me often that the reason they were passing the new charter was to get me out of office; that as long as the old charter lingered, I would somehow find a way of staying in office, and the city was sick and tired of me. They, of course he was being facetious, but only up to a point. The fact of the matter is I hardly approved of the new charter. I did review it a number of times in various draft forms, more for substantive content and all the sort of (*unintelligible word*) form. But I was not in any sense one of the draftspersons of the charter, but I did, I was privy to what was going on. I hardly approved of the old charter in this town, but, absolutely terrible. The city of Lewiston would never get back into, come up to any reasonable level as long as it continued with the old form of government; it was bad. The fact of the matter is that popular vote is not necessarily the best means of electing people who are going to administer the routine acts of a municipal government. I mean, a city administrator is a much better judge of how those acts ought to be performed rather than a group of five or six amateurs making up a commission who really don't know anything about the thing at all.

AL: Will you talk about the "good old boys" type of system of government? Does, fitting into

that, does that include, oh, somebody I interviewed talked about, the meeting would adjourn and then you'd all go to the restaurant and have your nightcap and that's where the real decisions were made, and you learned really quickly that you better go to the meeting after the meeting?

PI: I don't think that ever happened in Lewiston. If it did, you know, I was unaware of it. I think I would have been, I know I would have been aware of it, I mean I went to every meeting. I don't think there was any of that. And Lewiston really wasn't good old boys, I mean it was a political free-for-all. I mean, you know, I use the term "good old boys" in that they just passed the baton from one to another, and that goes on successively, generationally, whereas that was never the case in Lewiston. You didn't know from year to year whether you were going to be in, let alone from decade to decade. Yeah, it was wild; it's terrific.

AL: Was there at some point a sort of split in the Democrats between maybe cliques, maybe in the '60s? Do you have any recollection of that?

PI: The Maine Democratic Party?

AL: No, Lewiston.

PI: In the '60s?

AL: Yeah.

PI: No, I don't.

AL: I'm thinking Bill Rocheleau.

PI: Was that a hotly contested election, when Rocheleau got elected? Maybe it was? I don't remember who he ran against, even. Of course he was a mayor under the new charter. It could very well have been a lot of activity when he was elected. The, that's very possible. It only took two people to, you know, make a fight and get the city on its toes. No, that might very well have been the case. It could be; you know, I simply don't remember. I remember we had a succession, we'd have some very good mayors. I mean, Roland Marcotte was a terrific mayor; he was very. . . .

AL: Who was that?

PI: Roland Marcotte. He was a very, he was a, he was a good businessman, very good business-man. And he really took off a good chunk of each of two years of his life to work hard in the interest of the city, and that included long-range planning and pushing very hard to expand city services, make them more sophisticated, bring planners in, do things that the city instinctively rebelled against. It didn't want that kind of people, didn't want outsiders coming in and helping them plan how to run the city. They knew how to run the city. Roland Marcotte was enlightened; he was good. But the people who succeeded him, some were good and some weren't so good. Some were able people but kind of just wanted to go slow, served their term and got out. Others were very active. Bobby Clifford was extremely active, very active.

AL: What about his brothers Jere and Bill? Bim and Jere?

PI: Yeah, let's see. Bim was with, I don't know, Bim was never in the city government. Was he in the legislature? I don't think so, no, I don't think has ever been directly involved. I mean, I don't think Bim has ever stood for political office, has he? No. Jere was a alderman under the old charter, well, perhaps for a couple of terms. I don't know that he ever continued on politically after that. Bobby was a. . . .

AL: Bobby was the political. . . .

PI: . . . . a great politician, a wonderful politician, he was a terrific politician. Bobby was like his father. His father was, you know, a good politician. He probably, his father may even have been the mayor at one time, you know, way back in the '20s or something; I just don't know. But his father was an excellent politician. And their uncle, John Clifford, John D. Clifford, Jr. I know was a very good politician; he was a good politician. He ultimately became a judge on the United States District Court. But they were excellent politicians. And Bobby was cut from the same mold I guess, same stock. Bobby was a good politician, too.

AL: Now you mentioned at the last interview some of the political influences on Franco-Americans in the community were French radio programs. Was that Faust Couture's influence?

PI: Faust Couture owned the station, WCOU; that's what C-O-U stands for, Couture. The French language programs were on Sunday morning. I think all of Sunday morning was in French, whether it was music, there were a variety of offerings in the French language. But the one that was most listened to I think was Louis Philippe Gagne, who wrote for the *Messager*, so that he had a Sunday sort of column on the radio. And people listened to Louis-Philippe and it was very, very important if you were running for office in the city, if you were running for the mayor of the city, to make sure that Louis-Philippe approved of you and possibly get his support. It made a big difference when it came, if, if, because Louis-Philippe, he didn't like you, he'd say so. He'd say, "This man's not qualified." And that meant votes directly. Sure, I think French language was important then. I think, I don't know if it's important politically any-more, but it was very important a half century ago.

AL: Did you speak French?

PI: Well, did I speak French? I tried not to speak French because it was so bad, but at the time I felt I ought to at least be able to handle French in a conversational way. So for two years I studied French one night a week with a wonderful woman, Sister, got her name right here, oh, isn't that awful? Yes, I have it. Sister Antoinette Marie, because I don't want to say Marie Antoinette. Sister Antoinette Marie, she was a Dominican nun at the old Dominican convent on Bates Street. She was a wonderful lady, terrific lady. And I used to go once a week, I think it was on Tuesday night. And for an hour from I think 6:30 to 7:30 we'd talk French together and she'd work on my idioms and so forth. And of course I would pick up her French Canadian accent. And when I'd go to France occasionally and speak French, and they'd always say to me, "Where did you learn to speak French?" They caught me assassinating the French language.

But anyway, she was a wonderful woman. So it was marvelous. We had a very good relationship, excellent relationship. And I think that she, there's no question that she looked forward to talking with me because I was one of her "windows to the world," (*unintelligible phrase*) And she was a nun; that didn't mean she did not, she was, that did not mean that she didn't have interests that extended beyond her day-to-day tasks. She was a terrific lady. I felt very bad, and when she, I had to stop because she just couldn't serve any longer. And so there was a retirement home for her order someplace in Massachusetts, and after that I lost track of her. There are certain restrictions on who they, you know, how they can maintain contacts and so forth. Everything, you know, she had to get permission for me to work with her and permission I could send her post-cards when I traveled or give her a gift of an art book or something. And it, she had to get permission to keep the book. Anyway, she was great. Yes, the answer is I worked on my French and I had it up to a certain level that at least I didn't make a fool of myself. People were, it was clear that I was trying hard. . . . much better than that.

AL: Now you also work in this office with Laurier Raymond, Jr., is that right?

PI: Yeah. Larry and I, I can't remember when we associated ourselves. It was long into our careers. I started practicing in 1950 and I, I would say that we, our firms merged in 1986 so I'd been practicing at least thirty-five years before then. But if you haven't interviewed Larry, you absolutely have to. You've got to interview him.

AL: We've been playing phone tag. But we will get together with him.

PI: Well do it. You know, he'll be more circumspect than I am. He won't be as forthcoming because he's more, as I said, he's a more circumspect person than I am. I've given to you in a much more straightforward manner than he would. But he's got a tremendous amount of factual information that I've forgotten, and that I didn't know. And he will be able to tell you about how this person functioned in a certain situation, and how that person functioned in a certain situation. And I wouldn't know any of that. He won't be as, he can talk with a lot of authority about Louis Jalbert and, you know, give the devil his due I guess. I mean Louis had a lot of enemies and the enemies were very mean to him, too. So Larry can talk about that. And he had very good grasp of the grass root politics. I mean, he could get himself elected and elected and elected constantly, county attorney and then judge of probate. He was judge of probate for more than twenty years, so that meant. . . .

AL: Is, did he just. . . .?

PI: No, yeah, he decided he wouldn't run any more. He just, I haven't, there isn't any doubt that if he had decided to run he'd still be the judge of probate. But he decided he didn't want to be; it was enough. Of course, not, but anyway, he's got a big law practice and it's necessary that he had time to work.

AL: Now, judge of probate is the only judgeship that you can be politically affiliated?

PI: Right, if you're elected. It's the only elected judge. I don't know if we ever elected judges

in Maine. I just don't know enough about Maine historically. In some states they elect the judges, I think even on the appellate level. It seems very shocking here. And the issue is, you know, is the public better able to put judges in office than the governor? Depends on who the governor is. The governor of Maine put some terrible judges in office, I mean scandalously bad persons. That's the political system. Would the voters have done any better? I just don't know the answer to that. Probably not. Probably not. I don't think voters are a very good judge of who possesses the necessary temperament and skills to be a good judge. They're a very good judge of who possesses the necessary temperament and skills to be a politician; they're very good at judging that. Every time they go to the polls, they pass judgment on that. I don't think electing judges is a good idea, in fact.

End of Side A
Side B

AL: . . . .two of the interview with Phil Isaacson on June 23rd, 1999.

PI: Okay. My interest, my insights into Muskie are pretty much oblique because my contacts with Muskie were either social at parties, and not a lot of them, or when he was in office and I was trying to promote legislation of some kind. So that isn't, you know, very, that isn't intimate at all. However, I do have certain insights into him because Muskie's administrative assistant in probably, let me tell you when it was, yeah, at least as early as 1958 was John C. Donovan. John C. Donovan was a member of the Bates faculty; he was a professor of government at Bates, and is a very close and dear friend of mine. And John decided that he'd be happy in Washington getting his own direct political experience. He thought it would be more satisfying to him at least for the time being to be out of academe and into the real world of politics. And so he became Muskie's administrative assistant because he knew Muskie very well; both Bates graduates. I guess their, they overlapped. They may have been, I think they're even, I don't know if their years at Bates were exactly the same, but they could have been very much the same.

In 1960 Frank Coffin ran for governor, and Donovan decided that he would run for Congress from the old second district. In those days there were three districts, so he was going to run for Congress from the old second district. And he reestablished residence in Lewiston, and I became his campaign manager. So I spent the better part of a year, you know, deeply involved in politics. It ended with a kind of disaster, because Coffin did not get elected governor; he was defeated. Muskie [*sic*] did not get elected congressman from the second district. He was defeated by Stan Tupper who lived in Boothbay Harbor and who was a terrific guy, a very, very nice bright man, lovely person. We, Jack Kennedy did not carry the state of Maine. And Jack Kennedy, you know, may have taken Coffin over the side, and Donovan over the side, because perhaps if Kennedy hadn't been running, both of them would have been, would have been elected.

So that, you know, I got to know a great deal about Muskie while Donovan was running, because during much of that time, (maybe during all of that; I'm not sure of this), but during much of that time he was still working for Muskie. So he'd come up and campaign on weekends and holidays and so forth. So I got an insight into Muskie's nature, his character. And he was a splendid, a

splendid politician, very, very bright man, and a very tough guy to work for. Imperious, of course; very sense of self.

AL: Did Donovan. . . .?

PI: He had a great-, no, he had a, no, I'm not saying that his opinion of himself was unrealistic; obviously it wasn't unrealistic. He got to be Secretary of State, be presidential candidate, vice presidential candidate, and that is not a person of small consequence.

AL: But he knew it.

PI: He certainly knew it. But that's fine, you know, that's good. It adds color and interest to him. But he wasn't a modest or a humble person. Now, should he have been modest or humble? No, not necessarily, because I don't know that humility is a good quality in a politician; it probably isn't. I think politicians have to be driven; I think that they have to be enormously ambitious. Well, I don't think ambition and humility go hand in hand. I think humble people are not as ambitious, and there's no way to get elected if you're not ambitious. And you have to be more than ambitious, you have to be ambitious and driven. Both those things have to come together. I think they're called "Type A" in psychological terms. I think Muskie was probably a great example of a Type A.

In any event, he was a remarkable man, unbelievably remarkable man. If you were to say who's the best known person from the state of Maine in the pre-Stephen King days, you'd have to say Edmund S. Muskie. Of course, in more recent years Stephen King is most certainly most, the best-known person in the state of Maine, perhaps one of the best known people in the history the state of Maine. [He is] maybe the best-known person since, Lawrence, he was a great Civil War general.

AL: Joshua Chamberlain?

PI: Yeah, Lawrence Chamberlain [Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain]. In any event, Muskie was an utterly remarkable person; wonderful, great American story.

AL: One thing that we find interesting is when people can recollect stories that sort of illustrate maybe a sense of Muskie's personality, whether it was something humorous, or. . . .

PI: Okay, I'll tell, I'll give you only one story that illustrates his pers---, that illustrates an aspect of his personality. I went to a lovely party; it was held in Lewiston. And Muskie was invited. And during the course of the party there was some kind of disagreement over some issue. This wasn't a personal matter; it wasn't about people, that is to say. But it was about an issue, and Muskie really heated to the argument and, to the point where he really got furious. He broke the party up. And the, this was a very nice party by utterly respectable people. The party broke up because of Muskie's anger, and as I understand it he refused to write a letter to the hostess afterwards apologizing, (she was a very splendid and lovely, lovely woman), for breaking up the party. I think ultimately he did it, but they had to lean on him to do it. That shows a certain imperiousness of attitude, I mean. So, you know, that's a story, that's a snide

little anecdote about Muskie. But it's true; see, I was there. So. . . .

AL: Was this in the '60s, after he became, was in the Senate?

PI: Yeah, it would be in the, oh yes, sure. It would be in the '60s. When would it be in the '60s? mid -'60s. Yeah.

AL: What is it you think that Ed Muskie. . . .?

PI: But he's, you know, I didn't. . . . You know, I would ask him, I'd, you know, I'd push him. And I'd say, "Why don't you nominate, this is when you know he had a lot of political authority in Washington, why don't you, why don't you, why don't you nominate so and so for this, or push for the appointment of so and so." And he called back once and said, "What do you think I'm doing?" He was so irate. He was, he was great. He was, you know, it's wonderful that the state of Maine has had Edmund Muskie, and it's particularly good for Bates College.

AL: Well, what do you think Ed Muskie's most lasting gift to the state of Maine is?

PI: Oh wow, I hadn't thought of that. Well, I guess in the end his personal and political achievements. I mean that they have given us a significant historic, he, see, he,, he's given us a historic fact, a historic fact. A native of the state of Maine, a person who has indelibly identified himself with the state of Maine, rose to have, rose to play a very important role in national and even international politics. So that's a great, I don't want to say ornament to the state of Maine, but it's a great compliment and tribute to the state. Yeah. Yeah, I'm not sure, I mean, whether he had, I mean Sheppie would be much better at analyzing this kind of thing than I am.

AL: What about the two-party system in Maine? Putting Democrats back on the map.

PI: Yeah, how about that, how about that, of course. And I, you know, I've said that to myself a thousand times. Didn't rise to the surface now. In 1954 Edmund S. Muskie became governor of the state of Maine, and Maine was no longer a Republican state. It, for a time, became a Democratic state and now is a state of candidates. The best candidates, the most resourceful, hard-working, productive, intelligent candidates seem to get elected, and it doesn't seem to make any difference. And I say that from a city that is traditionally a center of Democratic votes, and this firm is identified with the Democrats. I mean, we identify with the Democrats, so we're a Democratic firm in a Democratic city. And I say without any hesitation that that ain't gonna get you elected. You've got to be, you've got to be a good candidate. A Republican can get elected in Lewiston. And I think Bill Cohen consistently led this city in votes; I'm not sure of that, but I think so. Anyhow he's very, very well-received. Absolutely, you know, somehow I didn't function very well when you asked that question. Of course, that was the end of the Republican hegemony in the state of Maine. It wasn't just through Muskie, of course. I mean there was a whole group of people that. . . .

AL: Frank Coffin?

PI: Yeah. Frank Coffin, John Donovan, Muskie, oh, taught government at Bowdoin, Cloutier,

Cloutier? No, no, Pelletier. He was a great activist; Louis Jalbert hated him. You know, he'd call himself "Pelletier" and he had a perfect right to do that, and that name was often pronounced "Pelletier". I think that the more elegant way people, who tried not to Anglicize their names might have called themselves Pelletier (*pel e tee ay*). But the working class in Lewiston called people by that name Pelletier (*pel chee*), and so, and of course Louis Jalbert never liked it. You know he didn't like Muskie or any of those guys, because Jalbert called himself "Mr. Democrat" and always wanted to have Democratic authority in the state of Maine. Whereas, he actually, once Coffin and Muskie and Donovan and Pelletier, and some terrific guy from, God, his name slips my mind, from Colby- you know who this is. . . .

AL: Paul Fullam?

PI: Paul Fullam. Once they all got together, it was perfectly apparent that that's where the power was, not in the old-time pols, hands of old-time pols like Jalbert.

AL: So Jalbert was disgruntled?

PI: Oh, he didn't like any of them. He didn't like, he had terrible things to say about Muskie. He used very inappropriate terms to describe Muskie. And he didn't like anybody. Of course not; why would he? You know. But, they transformed Maine. They were a kind of brain trust, and they were activists, ran for office, Muskie ran for office of course, Donovan ran for office, Coffin ran for office. They were all political animals; all of them loved politics. I mean, it's in their blood. And that's it. Things were never the same; sure, absolutely. So that, you know, we can't credit him with making it, but he certainly focused, he brought the focus on the fact that Maine was no longer a Republican state. So if you're looking for any single person, you've got to say Ed Muskie, absolutely.

AL: Is there anything that I've missed in asking you questions that's very obvious that it would be important to this project to talk about?

PI: Nothing that I can think of. As you can see, my brushes with Muskie are peripheral. In a way, I knew Jane better than Ed, because she got right down to a grass roots level of politics in the 1960s. . . .

AL: Oh, she did?

PI: . . . . when Coffin ran and Donovan ran and Kennedy ran. And she worked.

AL: What was her role? What did she do?

PI: Oh, she'd come right there. She'd come to the field days, she'd, you know, she'd do, you know, hands on stuff, absolutely. Rallies, she was often at the rallies. She loved it. At least, that was the impression she gave. I mean she, she's, she wasn't a recessive political wife. She was great, yeah, she was good, very good.

AL: Is there some family history? are you related in some way to Irving Isaacson?

PI: Am I related?

AL: Second or third cousins?

PI: Yeah, my father and Irving's father are first cousins. My father was Harrison and Irving's father was Peter, and they were first cousins. So Irving and I, it depends on how you, we're either second cousins or third cousins or first cousins once removed; I don't know how you measure it. Yeah, sure. They are an old Democratic firm, but not very active politically. Irving's father, you know, Peter's law partner was Louis Brann, and Louis Brann was Democratic governor in the state of Maine in the thirties. I guess he probably came in with Roosevelt in '32, didn't he? Yeah, came in with FDR in '32, yeah. So they were, they were political. They were a Democratic powerhouse for a while. Yeah.

AL: Great, thank you very much.

PI: Well, it's a pleasure.

End of Interview