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Jonitis, Elizabeth oral history interview

Meredith Gethin-Jones

Interview with Elizabeth Jonitis by Meredith Gethin-Jones

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee
Jonitis, Elizabeth

Interviewer
Gethin-Jones, Meredith

Date
October 29, 1999

Place
Lewiston, Maine

ID Number
MOH 159

Biographical Note

Elizabeth Jonitis was born in Westchester, Pennsylvania in 1921. Her parents, Clark and Elizabeth Wright, married during World War I and were Quakers. She went to a Quaker boarding school. During World War II she was in the Women's League for Peace and Freedom and volunteered with the American Friends Service, spending five years with that organization in Washington. She later taught English as a secondary language (ESL) in Lewiston, Maine. In 1954 she worked at Pineland, a school for the mentally handicapped. She worked in Special Education in the Auburn schools and was president of the Central Maine NAACP. In 1960 she assisted county jail inmates in acquiring their GEDs. Her husband is Peter Jonitis, who also was interviewed for this project (MOH 158).

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Shep Lee's political statements and stance; Peter Jonitis's position paper on Maine Indians; Muskie speaking at local schools; Elizabeth and her daughter meeting Muskie at the Auburn airport; mother's family's arrival in America; father's family's presence in Trenton, New Jersey; Levi Coffin and the Underground Railroad; college peace groups during WWII; Peter turning down job at Vanderbilt because of bigotry there; Southern Methodist church segregation at time of Civil War; Ku Klux Klan in Maine before 1921; ethnic

tensions in Lewiston between French and Irish in mills; Jean Sampson as president of League of Women Voters in Maine; NAACP in New York City after Smith; Louis Scolnik, NAACP legal advisor; NAACP convention in Atlanta in 1961; Benjamin Mays; and meeting Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Transcript

Meredith Gethin-Jones: The date is October 29th, 1999. We are at the Muskie Archives at Bates College. Interviewing is Meredith Gethin-Jones for an interview with Elizabeth Jonitis. It is 2:00 P.M. in the afternoon. Could you please state your full name and spell it for me, please?

Elizabeth Jonitis: Elizabeth W. Jonitis, E-L-I-Z-A-B-E-T-H, J-O-N-I-T-I-S.

MJ: And where and when were you born?

EJ: I was born in 1921 in Westchester, Pennsylvania.

MJ: What were your parents' names please?

EJ: Clark and Elizabeth Wright, W-R-I-G-H-T.

MJ: And do you have any siblings?

EJ: I have a brother who still lives in Pennsylvania.

MJ: And is he an older or a younger brother?

EJ: He's five years younger.

MJ: And could you tell me a little bit about your family life and background?

EJ: My parents met at (*unintelligible word*) where my father was teaching drafting and manual, what they called manual training. They were married at the time of the First World War and they went to live on his family's farm, his father then retired. My father established a business in a small town in Pennsylvania and lived there the rest of his life.

MJ: And so, where exactly were your parents from?

EJ: My father was from Burlington County, New Jersey, and my mother was from Chester County, Pennsylvania.

MJ: And what was your- what were your parents' occupations?

EJ: My father at the end of his life was a Ford dealer and my mother was his secretary.

MJ: And were your parents politically active?

EJ: Yes.

MJ: Okay, could you tell me a little bit about that?

EJ: My mother ran for the school board, and my father served on the, here in Maine they call it selectmen; I forget what it was called in Pennsylvania.

MJ: Were they Democrats or Republican, what was their political party?

EJ: I think they behaved like independents, but they were probably registered Republicans.

MJ: What were your parents' religious views?

EJ: They were members of the Society of Friends. My mother's family had come here the year after William Penn came to Pennsylvania, and my father's family had at one time owned most of Trenton.

MJ: Interesting, interesting. Were most of your parents' social views reflected, did your parents' social views reflect their religious beliefs?

EJ: I think the peace and social justice part, yes.

MJ: And how did your parents' attitudes and beliefs affect you as you were growing up?

EJ: Well, I can just see their, they had people that came, particularly African-Americans who came twelve miles to do business with him instead of doing business with closer people. And I was sent to schools where there was integration and so forth.

MJ: And how did that affect you?

EJ: I just took it as a way that life was, or should be, that's all.

MJ: Did growing up in integrated communities, or at least integrated community schools affect your efforts towards the NAACP and so forth?

EJ: No, I think that came more from my religious background, the Society of Friends.

MJ: And you did become very involved in community service, from my notes, is that correct?

EJ: Yeah.

MJ: Could you tell me-?

EJ: I started as a teenager, I mean, you know, I volunteered with the American Friends Service while I was in high school.

MJ: Where did your motivation and values come from, what were they, they obviously came from your church community?

EJ: The Society of Friends have meetings, not churches.

MJ: Oh, sorry.

EJ: Now, that's not true nationally, that's true in Philadelphia, though.

MJ: Oh, okay. Where did, what are the values of the Society -?

EJ: Oh, the other thing was, I went to Quaker boarding school, I went to (*name*) College, I mean it was just, I was surprised to find that there was another world out there.

MJ: Beyond the Quaker community?

EJ: No, beyond Quaker values.

MJ: Beyond Quaker values. Now, how do Quaker values differ from the rest of the world?

EJ: Well, the kind of people that we studied in (*unintelligible word*) school were people who had done, who were, well, we studied John Greenleaf Whittier, and we had studied the abolitionist, Levi Coffin, [who] had taken over three thousand underground, people through the Underground Railroad. These were people that we felt, that we looked up to, people that we knew from, I didn't know personally, but I knew of from other meetings. Had been a woman who had gone and taught the schools when the blacks were freed in the south. This was just the accepted norm. We were pacifist and we didn't believe in things that were not social justice.

MJ: What were some of the influences in your life beyond the meetings and your family?

EJ: That would be the school and the college.

MJ: And what did you learn from those experiences at the college and your school?

EJ: Same things that I talked about. We had, this was of course, I was going to college at the time of the Second World War and we had peace groups that met at, it seems to me we met at six thirty in the morning in an unheated building because so many of the students were working their way through college that we, that was the only time that we found that everybody was free to come.

MJ: Interesting. And after college, what -?

EJ: Oh, after college I worked for the League of Women Voters, no, got the wrong organization, I worked for the W--, let's see, Women's League for Peace and Freedom and, which is an organization that still exists and you'll find a biography of Mildred Olmsted for whom I worked in the Bates library. Oh, and she's taught in the women's program here at Bates, taught about her. And so I worked for her organization at the time of the Second World War.

MJ: Did you continue to work towards social justice and the women's movement after World War II, and after this organization?

EJ: Well, let's see, what happened next in my life. I got married, and I married a sociologist, oh, I had majored in sociology because of my interest and married a sociologist. And when we, one of his first jobs was in Maryland at Washington College, and I was so involved with the blacks there and it was not looked on with favor with the college.

MJ: How did you and your husband, Peter, meet?

EJ: We walked up, I was living in Philadelphia. I had an apartment by myself. And we were introduced and walked up an icy street and stood on the corner and talked about, there's a particular kind of twins that cows have that then are sterile, and we stood on that corner and I forget what they're now called, but we talked for an hour.

MJ: That's interesting. And then what happened, and then you -?

EJ: We just visited. He visited enough so that we then got married the next September.

MJ: How has his views as a sociologist affected you?

EJ: No, I had more influence on him than he did on me in that respect. The fact that a person is a sociologist, and I was amazed at this at the University of Pennsylvania, because I, after two years at (*name*) I went to the University of Pennsylvania, and it appalled me to find that I had men who were teaching sociology who were bigots.

MJ: Okay.

EJ: One of them was one of the best known sociologists nationally at the time. He was known particularly in child and family, and he was, he had his own research group within the college. And it just never had occurred to me, because you see I had thought of sociology as a group who tried to do things about things. That is not what sociology is. Sociology is, or what their dream is to be, is to be a science and to be objective. He was not objective, but he, as I say, he was very much respected within the academic community. He also had a great deal of social cl- many social class negative thoughts.

MJ: Now, you moved around with your husband to the University of Pennsylvania and Haverford and Washington College and so forth -

EJ: Well now, see, he was still living in Pennsylvania when he did, when he taught one year at Haverford, and then we went to Washington College which was in Maryland. We then went, the next year he was at Harvard at the Russian Research Center, and then he came to Bates and was here I think it was fourteen years. And then we went to Florida. And we would not have gone to Florida because he was offered a job earlier at Vanderbilt, and he turned it down because he asked what he would do when his colored friends visited and he was told he didn't have colored friends if he was teaching at Vanderbilt. So we didn't go to Vanderbilt.

The first year we went to Florida, he was teaching at Florida Southern College, which was working very hard at, a Methodist school, which was working very hard on race relations both within their own community. And the Methodist church was working at becoming a united church instead of- it had divided at the time of the Civil War as a great many churches did. And it was the first year of integration in the school system, and I wouldn't have accepted a job in the school system, or I wouldn't have moved where there was a school system that wasn't going to be integrated.

MJ: Can you -?

EJ: Then we came, then we came, then we were at, a year at the American Friends Service, no, five years at the American Friends Service Committee in Washington, D.C., and then we moved back to Maine.

MJ: What were your impressions of Lewiston when you first moved here?

EJ: Lewiston? Well, you see, to begin with when you first, in '53 this was, and Lewiston is not the same town now that it was then. But when you moved here and you were part of the Bates community, Bates had a different- it was more apart from the community than it is now, although many feel that it's very apart from the community now. But Bates has worked over the years. When we came here Dean Rowe was here, and Dean Rowe was the one who worked for integration in staff at the, at Bates. He hired, I'm not going to be able to think of her name, as, what do you call the person who keeps track of the grades and that kind of thing? I took notes before I came, but I thought you were going to talk about different things and I didn't, at any rate, and she, I regularly see her at Bates functions and so forth.

But it was interesting that when I did a research paper for the University of Maine when I was taking courses there, and I took a Maine history course and I wrote on the Ku Klux Klan in Maine. And it was a very active Ku Klux Klan, it was one of the most active in the country.

MJ: When was this, I'm sorry?

EJ: This would have been in '21 and then earlier. And I interviewed former Governor Baxter, who gave Baxter State Park, and he told me about many of the Klan activities and so forth. However, let's see how I can tell this without telling, without getting names involved because I forget which senator it was. When I interviewed, I, somebody suggested that I interview a particular doctor in Portland, which I did. When I went to that doctor and talked to him, he told me that as a boy he had been, went with his friend who was babysitting the children of one of the senators, gee, I might be able to find out which senator it was because it would have been probably in Portland. At any rate, this was a United States senator, and as the man came down the steps going out that night, the senator, out of the box he was carrying fell a Klan uniform. And this particular doctor, or his friend or somebody, one of them somehow had a Jewish connection and it really, they understood exactly what they were seeing and they were very upset about it.

So, he, when he told me that then I began to get more into other aspects of the Klan. And it was very interesting that when I began to read newspaper accounts and things, that there was a cross burned on Mt. David and when I went to talk to Dean Rowe about this, now that I'm older I understand what went on with him, he literally could not remember it. There are a lot of things I don't remember and I, as I get so I don't remember things, I understand more what could have happened with him. And the reason that I knew that he knew about it, even though it had slipped from his memory, was that the newspaper account referred to their having interviewed Dean Rowe about it. Now Dean Rowe was not in town when it happened, but he was interviewed

about it afterward.

So that we had, and it was, the other thing that was interesting, I was also told to go and talk to some of the Catholics in town and I talked to I think it was one of the priests. And I've always been sorry I didn't get this paper back from, I wrote it for Bob York [Maurice Robert York] who was collecting himself things to be able to write, to be able to write on the, he wanted to write a history of Maine because there has never been a really good history of Maine written. And many of the things that he taught in class, he would refute what other writers had said.

MJ: This is Bob York?

EJ: This is Bob York, Robert York. Robert York I don't think ever got the book written, but he told us he wasn't going to be giving our papers back. This is the days before Xeroxing and I didn't think I wanted to go through the labor of making a copy and I didn't think I'd ever want it, and there's been a dozen times since that I wished I had. At any rate, the Catholics told me that they remembered, or I don't think it could have been within their memory, I think they had heard about it, but I think it happened, that there was originally a mission church on Lincoln Street and that this mission church had been set on fire and the, when the firemen came local people around there cut the hoses and chopped, they referred to is as "Axed the Hoses." Oh, it was one of the Catholics that told me about the church.

MJ: Mt. David incident?

EJ: No, the fire, the cross being burned on Mt. David, too. Now, I think he did remember that, I think that happened (*unintelligible word*). This other I think was, it had to be early enough that it wasn't the Klan; I think it was the Know Nothing Party. Because the Klan was not active in Maine in the early, when the Klan was first organized in 1865 or seven or something, in fact I've just read of the Klan's organization in a biography on Jefferson Davis. I learned a lot of things that I hadn't known before. But I think that this situation on Lincoln Street I think was the Know Nothing Party, and they objected to anything Catholic and so forth.

The Maine State Library has pamphlets and things, some of which they sent me, and I don't think I had to return them, but at any rate they sent me pamphlets and things about the Klan in Maine and so this is well documented. And we had a member of the NAACP who remembered as a child one time getting stuck in traffic and it turned out that they were in a Klan parade. This was in one of the towns near Lewiston. So, I don't know what else was in that paper that might be of interest. Okay, go back to, you want to go back to Bates, what do you want to do next?

MJ: I was actually just curious about Lewiston. You were telling me a little bit about the KKK and the Know Nothing Party.

EJ: Oh, yeah, the other thing about Lewiston was, and it isn't as true now but there's still some feeling. When we first came to town, we were offered a house on Frye Street-

MJ: This is in 1953?

EJ: Uh-huh, that he, the realtor said that the house was sold but it was sold to a French family and he would get it for us for a thousand dollars less since we weren't French.

MJ: Really?

EJ: Really.

MJ: That is very interesting.

EJ: So, we deliberately didn't buy the house, didn't want it anyway, but I was interested in seeing that that house was kept in better repair and was given, was, the maintenance on it was better than many houses in Maine. We were also taken to Auburn and the realtor, different realtor, the realtor there assumed from our name that we were Jewish, which was fine. But they, and we didn't enlighten him otherwise, and we were shown a house that would be close enough to walk to the synagogue. So it was int-, we found house hunting in Lewiston an interesting experience.

MJ: Did you feel that because they thought you were Jewish, there was any discrimination?

EJ: No, I didn't feel that, I didn't feel that. I just felt he was trying to be accommodating and find something that he thought that –

MJ: Was suitable for your needs.

EJ: - that would be suitable for us, and I think he was, no, I think he was trying to be helpful. At least that's my impression. And I don't know whether the other man was lying through his teeth or not. But there was great feeling about the French and the Anglo population.

MJ: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

EJ: Well, I'll do more on French and then be sure I do Irish. To begin with, there were, God, there are things that you don't know whether to tell or whether not to tell. Well, let's tell the positive. Dean Rowe was one of the ones that tried to bring harmony between the French and the English and when he went and spoke at meetings and things and people in the French community thought well of him. One of the places that I got a insight into the feelings that the French had was when I was in the hospital, I don't know if you, if you're in a hospital and you're running around in your hospital garb and you go out to sit on the porch, people don't know who's who, and they're much more candid about things that they feel. So I got an earful about the fact that no French had ever been, this was someone who was French. No one who was French had ever gotten a decent job or had gotten any status in Lewiston at all. Well of course since then you'll find French names as presidents of the bank, you'll find them the leading names at the hospital, and you'll find them having been mayor and so forth.

So, but I was able to see many changes in, during that time that I've been in Lewiston. On, see if I can remember what, oh, I teach English as a second language and so I've had French students there and you'll find that the French, even more particularly the ones who are educated in

Canada, Canadian schools only, for some schools, for some of my students who have worked in the Bates Mill and things, had only gone to the sixth grade. And they, when the factories closed in town they had to get more education to be able to go on, so that I had, I've had a number of, in fact I suppose I've had more Francos than I've had any other particular language in town. At any rate, one of them was telling me that he went to St. Patrick's one time and he got told by other teenagers, "Why don't you go to your own church?" so that even within the community itself.

When I was not attracting enough members of the NAACP that I thought were, that were Catholic, I went to the priest who was in charge of St., the Yankee one, across the street from the Baptist church. And I went to him and he said, he joined, but he said, "If there's anything like the Irish, if the blacks were treated anything like the Irish were treated, I will be glad to join." And he was talking about things like the fact that there used to be signs on the mills, "No Irish Need Apply." You see, the mills were actually, people were brought in by the trainload literally to, from Canada, French speaking, to work in the mills. And I one time read, and I can't tell you where I read it, that actually more of them went home than stayed here. But when we came to Lewiston, seventy-five percent of the population was French and eighty-five percent of them were Catholic.

MJ: Really.

EJ: And if you made phone calls, you would get told in French, "No one here speaks English, please call back at five o'clock," you'll be told this in French, "There'll be somebody here that speaks English then." It used to be, now if you wanted a job as a check out person in the grocery stores or something, you had to be, you had to have both languages.

MJ: You had to be bilingual, both French and English?

EJ: Currently, I have been told by the employment office because I often deal with the employment office because of I'm trying to help my students get jobs, I am told that there are almost no jobs and the, well I've been told no jobs but I know of some, no jobs in which being able to speak French is an advantage. However, I have students who are working at St. Mary's who are working as CNAs who have to translate for the doctor and the nurses from the patient because there are enough elderly French people in town that, yes, they need someone who will translate for them. And they cannot get the services that they would get if they had a French speaking professional helping them because as helpful as a CNA may try to be, that's not the same thing as being able to get the exact words that someone is saying for a diagnosis.

MJ: I'm sorry, what is a CNA?

EJ: Certified nurse's aide.

MJ: Okay. And-

EJ: Now one thing, if you want to interview people about the NAACP, I think that Neville Knowles is still working at Bates College and he was the membership chairman of the NAACP

and is a black who would be able to tell you more about things that he was seeing from his side of things.

MJ: Moving back to Lewiston again, what did you feel it was like economically in the 1950s and 1960s? What sort of issues were important?

EJ: Well to begin with, in that when we came in '53 it was almost impossible to find rental housing. In fact we ended up in, we were fortunate to be in a position to be able to buy a house because at that time Bates had barracks that they were renting to faculty members and there had been, you see, this was in '53 and there still hadn't been enough building to be able to make enough housing. Currently, Lewiston is in a position of having so much rental housing that they're, that landlords can't afford to rent and heat properly because they can't get enough rent for the apartments. And there have been enough people move out of town so that I heard recently that the population has gone down three thousand.

MJ: Really, because of rental prices?

EJ: No, no, simply because people are so well off that they're moving out of town to lower tax areas, and also to be able to build a house and so forth. I don't know how many lots there are left in Lewiston, it hasn't occurred to me to find out, but I know that in Brunswick the last lot that you could build a house on has just been sold. Therefore, it's impossible then to go and build a house in Brunswick, and I would think it would be very difficult in Lewiston.

MJ: You said that, you mentioned that, you said that Lewiston is not the same town as it was back then.

EJ: To begin with, this is the country in general, the race relation situation. Despite the fact that people think things are not right, and I'm not saying they are right, I'm saying they're so changed that you've got a whole different situation. You've also got a different economic situation in that when we came to town all the mills were working. Libby was working, Bates was working. Pete used to say every time he went by Bates and heard the shuttles there, he would say, "If it hadn't been for education, that's where I'd be." because for him, his parents had been immigrants, uneducated immigrants. His father spoke five languages but that doesn't give you any intellectual, um, his mother was illiterate, and if he hadn't, he worked his way through college and so every time he went by the mill he was very conscious of the fact that . . . .

Right now, of course, the mills are down and at Lewiston Adult Ed I have continually seen one factory after another close and we have gone through times when we were desperate to try to get people educated to be able to go on. Currently there are so many people working that we are short of students, so it's a different situation. And when I came back to town in 1980 was the time when the refugees were coming.

MJ: From where?

EJ: Mostly Southeast Asia at the time. Since then we've had Russian ones that were from Russia and I forget what our count was on the number of countries we've had, but. And the

other way that I can tell where America is, where the United States is active, is that when I get soldiers' wives. Any time that we're any place, for instance I now have three Colombians because of our troops being down in Colombia.

MJ: How did you become an ESL educator?

EJ: When I was in Florida, in Lewiston, okay, in Lewiston I became, I was on a number of things that started- organizations. And one of those organizations I was, no, it was before I was teaching school, one of those organizations was the Central Maine, God, it was the one that, schools and parent organization for retarded children, I forget the names or the initials. You should have given me a list of what you wanted me to- what do you want, before I came. Therefore, let's start back the other way, the summers. The second summer we were here, '54, we worked for the American Friends Service Committee; we ran a student project at Pineland, which was the main school for the retarded. Because of that, somebody knew and asked me if I would help work on (*unintelligible word*) and so with the parent groups, we got the organization done for the retarded children. Where was I leading to?

MJ: You were telling me about how you became involved in ESL.

EJ: Oh, how I got in ESL. Okay, sounds very involved (*unintelligible phrase*). So before I was through with it, I had gotten a masters degree in special education and I was teaching special education in the Auburn schools. When I went to Florida, it was on my credentials that I had been special ed, and the junior high that I was working in, I was made, we had, they had a unit of what was special needs, it wasn't called that but that's what it amounted to, and as I say they were the first years of integration down there. So, I was made supervisor, without the title, of five different teachers there, and one of them was special education. But then they began to have the refugees from Cuba and I got, three of those teachers including me, got a lot of the Cubans. Therefore I had worked with, although I was not the ESL teacher, I had worked with students who were coming in from Cuba, and then we were doing regular beginning classes.

Then, also when I went to Washington, we were directors of a house across the street from the International House, where we took international post-doctoral scholars. And therefore I had the, they were all post doctoral, sometimes they were here to get their doctorates sometimes, but at any rate most of them at least had finished their undergraduate work. Occasionally we had others. But we had people there from over a hundred different countries during the five years we were there, therefore I had had some experience working with them and working with the schools that they went to, the ESL schools they went to in Washington, D.C.

So when I came back to Lewiston, there was a notice in the paper that, there was an article in the paper in which it said that because of funds they were not able to supply a ESL teacher to Lewiston High School for the students that they were having come in from Laos. So I went up and volunteered. Almost every job I ever had, I volunteered first. So I went up and volunteered. And then they had an opening for an ESL teacher because somebody left and I was (*unintelligible word*) to teach. So I took that.

Then we went to Haverford for another year. That was the second time that Pete was at

Haverford for his post-doctoral guest scholar, no, that was not post doctoral guest scholar, well, he was doing research on early jails in Pennsylvania, and, which was largely a Quaker organization. And so when I came back, I called and volunteered again and before I got in as a volunteer, the person who had, was teaching the year I went away, had gone to Ireland and I was able to teach again, so I've been teaching it ever since.

MJ: Wonderful, great. Can I just stop the tape for one moment and turn it over.

End of Side A
Side B

EJ: It ain't going to get thirty years on that tape, we're going to have a lot of tapes before we're through with it.

MJ: This is side B of the interview with Elizabeth Jonitis on October 29th, 1999 at the Muskie Archives. Interviewing is Meredith Gethin-Jones. Okay, you were telling me about, you were in -

EJ: Finished it.

MJ: Okay, with your teaching and ESL. Okay, I'd like to talk a little bit about the people that you knew in Lewiston, Louis Scolnik, Jean Sampson, and so forth. Can you tell me a little bit about your relationship with each of them?

EJ: Well, I'm not sure where I met Lou. Jean Sampson, when I, to begin with, if you want things on Jean Sampson you want to get her memorial service because I learned things at her memorial service that I hadn't even known before, and I have known her since I came in '53. When I first came in '53, my neighbor invited me to go to a League of Women Voters meeting. And I don't remember which particular position Jean was holding at that time, but Jean was, became president of the League of Women Voters in Maine and she was active in any worthy cause you want to know about. Now, what happened with Jean and the NAACP was this, I know now, I didn't know then, that she had worked in the NAACP office in New York City after she graduated from Smith. And apparently Alberta Jackson knew that, Alberta Jackson was very anxious to see an NAACP organized here.

MJ: In Lewiston?

EJ: In Lewiston, taking a wider area, central Maine.

MJ: Were there, I'm sorry, were there any other NAACP organizations in Maine?

EJ: No, of course not. They would never have gotten around to me to be able to help organize one because that would have been able to have (*unintelligible word*) if they'd had one to start with. At any rate, Alberta went to Jean and, Alberta comes up in the summer and, with the work, if you're really just in the NAACP, you'll be interest-, she's the one to. At any rate, she and her husband had moved to Lewiston because, gee, I hadn't thought how involved things were with

each other, because we had started a school for retarded children.

MJ: Is this in the -?

EJ: And how she knew about the school for retarded children, whether or not, I don't know. But at any rate, she was particularly anxious to be able to give her daughter extra help and, that was at least among the reasons that she moved to, actually she moved to Auburn. How she and Jean met each other I don't know, but there were problems at the Naval Base, Brunswick and Topsham, well it's an Air Force Base (*unintelligible word*), and -

MJ: What sort of problems?

EJ: Well, I'll get there. They, and she wanted an NAACP, and she went to Jean for help in getting one started. Well Jean couldn't do it because Jean and her husband were going I forget where, but he was, that was his sabbatical year, or he was going for advanced studying or something.

MJ: This is Dick Sampson?

EJ: Yeah, and, but Dick's the one to talk to about this. At any rate, so she came to me and gave me tips because she knew that I had helped start the retarded program and she knew that I'd helped start the speech and hearing one and she knew what my attitudes were about race relations in general, hoping that I, and I'd been active but not particularly skilled at the League of Women Voters. You see, that's how Jean and I have known each other most. And so she knew my attitudes, she hoped that I had some organizational skills, and she came to me and filled me in on, and I, oh, and I was just back from the Middle East which meant that I had resigned from everything, so I had no excuse to say, "You know, Jean I am just too busy." Besides, it was something that interested me. So she gave me some tips and introduced me to people and so forth. And then we got organized and so that first year I was president, I forget even who was vice president then, but we were the Central Maine NAACP. And we helped organize Portland and we helped organize Bangor.

But I don't know if there are people still around who would know about this because I recently had Bangor people talking to me about, you know, "You really ought to get interested in the NAACP," without knowing that I ever had been. And because of course I had left the state in '67, which meant that many people who came in afterward wouldn't have had any way of knowing. Lou Scolnik did, and as I say I don't know how, maybe Jean had introduced me to him by then, I don't know, but at any rate Lou did our legal advising and did our legal work, and as far as I know he did it bono. The only case that I know that we actually took was up in Machias, and you need to have Lou come in and tell you about it because he will remember more about it than I do.

And in fact there was somebody from the University of Maine who tried to write a, or did write a masters thesis and Lou was interviewed by him, and as I said, Lou would be able to get it straighter. It was something to do with discrimination at a dance and that kind of thing. However, they were not the kind of cases that people would come to us. They came to us, oh,

and you see these people in the Navy bases felt that they could join the NAACP but they felt that they daren't, without hurting their standing in the military, become officers in the NAACP. Many of them were very capable people and would have made very good officers and should have been the ones who were organizing it, but they were afraid that this was a dangerous thing to do for their careers. They were not just temporary people, you see, they were career people, they were flying the planes and so forth. I had one woman who was sure that she was being discriminated against in housing because she only had a slate sink and she showed me, and well, it was obvious from her furniture that she was used to living better than I knew of any houses available in this area, as she was actually living between here and Brunswick.

As I say, from my own experience in house hunting in '53, and this would have been in '6-, yeah, I came back from, oh it would have been 1960 because I came back from the Middle East in '60. And she, but there, now I'm sure there were cases of discrimination. Don't misunderstand me. People would call and they would be told on the phone, you, that there was something available and when they got there, things like, "You don't look like you talk," would be said. And the family had suddenly just rented apartments and things to local relatives. And so I'm absolutely sure that there was discrimination. However, I got other people like Neville Knowles who never had any trouble getting housing, and he's in the Bahamas, and so, as I say, but we never had any of those housing ones.

To begin with there wasn't a housing law at the time. We never had any of the housing ones that we could actually prove. The thing that we actually changed the law in, we only added one sentence, and it was Damon Scales who told us how to do that. He was a lawyer who was a member. And that was on motel and hotel (*unintelligible word*) discrimination.

And when I was going to the NAACP convention in Atlanta, Georgia, I called one of the men, a minister who had written to us from (*unintelligible phrase*), had written to us about his discrimination situations and that we had written back. And I wanted to stop and see him and tell him that we had gotten the law changed and if he ran into trouble to (*unintelligible phrase*). And he was, and he had said, I wanted to stop by, well when I stopped by he was so surprised that I wasn't black that he was, went out calling to find somebody to invite me to stay overnight, and I didn't need someplace to stay overnight but he felt the obligation to extend hospitality. Because you see, one of the problems that blacks had a terrible problem with was travel. There was nothing worse than travel, I mean, you couldn't stop and go to the bathroom. There wasn't anyplace that you could stay overnight. You, they brought out circulars, you developed friends and referrals to be able to stay in somebody's home.

And, incidentally, I brought back with me, drove back with me from the convention a wife of an electrical engineer whose home I stayed in on the way back and it was better housing than I know of anything in Maine. They had, in order, I think this was North Carolina, in order to keep blacks out of the electrical field, to be able to be an electrician you had to have an electrical engineering degree. Well this man hadn't let that hold him back at all. He'd just gotten the electrical engineering degree and he was an electrician.

MJ: When was the convention, what year, do you remember?

EJ: That would have been I think probably '61, but I'm not sure.

MJ: And when was the law changed?

EJ: Hmm?

MJ: When was the law changed?

EJ: Law changed about what?

MJ: You said that the law was changed.

EJ: That was only state of Maine, it didn't change, that couldn't change anything nationally. Oh no, that was only the state of Maine. No, uh-uhn. However, I've had, I have black friends that tell me it's more expensive to travel now than it used to be when they used to stay with their friends. But that doesn't mean that they weren't the ones who were helping to make the laws changed. One of the associations that I built up as- when I was president of the NAACP. . . . And let's go back now to Lewiston.

MJ: When were you president?

EJ: That would have been 1960 and I don't know how many years, not very long. The next president was William [D.] Burney from, and he's black, was black, he's dead, deceased, from Augusta, and his son William [D.] Burney, Jr., I think his name is William Burney, Jr., was mayor of Augusta for a long time. He was mayor before John [Jenkins], who is it, was mayor here in Lewiston. At any rate, Benjamin Mays, when he came to town, you know who he is and all that, alright, when Benjamin Mays came to town -

MJ: Well, I know of the Benjamin Mays Center, I don't really know of Benjamin Mays.

EJ: All right, Benjamin Mays was president of Morehouse College at that time. He was a student at Bates, graduated from Bates, then he went to Chicago and graduated there. I think I've got my second school right. At any rate, when he came back to Bates, he of course had to stay at the president's house because the DeWitt Hotel, which faced the park, did not accept blacks.

MJ: Really?

EJ: Really. That's right. And when anybody of stature who was of color, they either stayed at the president's house, or at that time there was a, there were rooms on the second floor of Chase Hall where they could house them. Well, let's see, shall I finish, I'll finish the DeWitt Hotel and then I'll come back to the Mays. One of the things that they did when they organized the NAACP; they wanted to have a dance and they wanted it at the DeWitt and they brought it off.

MJ: The DeWitt Hotel is where?

EJ: It's torn down. It's gone.

MJ: It was in Lewiston though?

EJ: It was in Lewiston, it was on Pine Street, it faced the Kennedy Park. And it was, it had formerly discriminated and the NAACP members wanted to say, "No more."

MJ: And this was in the 1960s?

EJ: Oh yes, this would have been '61, '2, '3 or '4, somewhere around then, before '65. So we had, we had the dance at the DeWitt. The other thing that was interesting, Bob Wade, who I think went to Bates, and he is still living and can be interviewed, his wife Nellie Wade was very active in the YWCA. Now, she was so active that she was on the international board, and of course her race relations attitudes were exactly the same as mine. So, they wanted her to be the person that greeted people and helped them hang up their coats. Well, I felt, you see, they were just having a meeting, nothing special, and I felt that this was not the status that Nellie Wade should have. I was, I knew Nellie Wade but we didn't entertain each other particularly, we just served on committees and things. But no, they wanted Nellie Wade. And Nellie Wade, gracious international person that she was, was the one who hung up the coats that night, and did it graciously. So it was interesting to see what people's ideas about interrelationships were.

I remember one time when they, Nellie had, was running something that was held at the YW in Auburn, and they used to have a house over there. And so Nellie had been helping host this whole thing, and I forget exactly what it was but it was integrated. And one of the black women afterwards said to me, "But she's out washing the dishes." I mean, they, some of the blacks had come from a background where whites didn't get in the dishpan, and they were surprised that the gal who was running the whole thing was out in the dishpan helping cleaning up, so it was interesting to see.

People now, maybe they still have the experience, but people now it seems to me don't remember or realize how much this also freed white people. When I first lived south, it was during the Second World War and I was waiting on a corner for a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. You've heard about Montgomery from other things. And I was in my early twenties, and there was a black woman waiting for the bus and she was older than I was. And I was always taught that therefore as a kid I waited and she got on the bus first. Well, she tried to refuse and I, not knowing I was getting her in trouble, insisted. And the bus driver gave her hail Columbia, this is when the blacks were still sitting in the back of the bus, so the driver was giving her hail Columbia and I said, "But I insisted." He said, "You may not know any better, but she does."

So when race relations changed legally, you see, I was one of those who thought at that, before that time I had thought, this thing has to be done on the basis of love and acceptance and so forth. That kind of experience and others taught me that if you have a law, people may not like the law but most people will live up to the law. And that therefore you can get changes that, so that it, it also freed us, the white people, to be able to go places and do things and be natural that we weren't able to do under segregation.

Now let's see, I said I was going to get back to Benjamin Mays. So Benjamin Mays was staying at the president's house, and I was president of the NAACP and I was anxious to get a picture that we could put in the paper with the name NAACP on it with the hope of publicizing. So I asked Benjamin Mays, I called him and asked him if I stopped by with a reporter and gave him a check from the NAACP locally for the national NAACP, if he'd be willing to accept and have a picture taken. So in the whole, the entry way of the president's house, I guess Ed Phillips was president when they were here, there was a picture of me handing a check, which was such a small check compared with what a president of a college would (*unintelligible word*). But of all things, President Mays was the most gracious person that ever happened. So we had that as a publicity picture in the paper and it gave us recognition.

Now, president Mays, when he came back to visit Bates, always visited the widows of the professors that he had had when he was here. Ones who had for instance given him jobs like shoveling snow, and incidentally he got frostbite which he always had pain from afterward because not having lived where it was cold weather, he didn't know to be careful about his toes getting cold and so forth. At any rate, one of those widows, and I forget which one, who is no longer living I'm sure, lived on Ware Street and invited Pete and I to lunch, that's my husband, to lunch with President Mays so that I've gotten to know him a little bit better. So that when I went to the NAACP convention in Georgia, Atlanta, Georgia, which I've mentioned before, I wanted to see Morehouse College and so forth so I went up and I was sitting under a tree at Morehouse and President Mays came over and spoke to me. I had no idea that in a different setting that he would recognize me, I sometimes don't even recognize my mailman in a different setting, and chided me gently for not having made a courtesy call at his home, and was good enough to include me in a policy meeting that was being held that night with Martin Luther King.

So that was the first that I'd met Martin Luther King, first- no, that was the second time I met Martin Luther King. I was at a policy meeting there, but I was so awed at what was going on I can't possibly tell you what was going on at the meeting, there were not more than twelve of us there at the table, and so. No, I'd met Martin Luther King before when he spoke at what we call the Friends General Conference in Cape May, which was a society of Friends that had invited him to speak. And actually I worried because we were meeting on the pier over the ocean and that room was so crowded that we had all the children sitting on the stage with him and I had visions that we would all end up in the ocean. However, it was a great speech. It was better than the one he gave in Washington, much better.

MJ: Wow.

EJ: However, they may have record-, they may have made a copy of it but I don't know that they did, and as far as I'm concerned it was, it was a very different kind of speech because he was speaking to a smaller audience, but it was a speech that showed the greatness of the man.

Let's see, oh, let's finish up on President Mays because I've got two or three other things to tell about him. One is that when, let's see, I told about, (*unintelligible phrase*), oh, incidentally, he included something I said in his book, <u>Born to Rebel</u>, but I, and he's deceased unfortunately and I can tell you that now I understand better what happened in that situation. I was living in

Waterboro, South Carolina, and I walked down the sidewalk and the black men got off the sidewalk and walked in the dirt. And he didn't know that the year that I reported that happening, that it was still happening. Well as I look at it now, and I've read more books and understand things better, I realize what happened was, I was on the wrong sidewalk. The sidewalk in front of the stores was wide and it was where the whites walked. The sidewalk across the street was weed ridden and was very narrow, and I was walking on the wrong side of the street because I was walking where the blacks were supposed to walk, on their little narrow sidewalk with weeds growing over it. And therefore of course, there wasn't room for two people to pass easily, which there would have been on the other side where three or four could have passed easily. So out of graciousness not to make a conflict, they had gotten off and walked in the dirt.

Now let's see, what else do I know about Benjamin Mays (*unintelligible phrase*). When we were at Florida Southern College was when Martin Luther King was shot. And Martin Luther King always considered Benjamin Mays his mentor, and Benjamin Mays had given the, which we'd seen of course on television and things, had given the speech at the funeral and so forth. So, when we went to Atlanta to see Martin Luther King's grave, I was not going to be guilty of not making my call that I didn't make in Atlanta. He had since moved in Atlanta and at that time he was retired from Morehouse and he was president of the school board. But we went and made our courtesy call and were graciously received. He had recently lost his wife and that was a tough one for him, too. Let's see, I guess that covers that.

MJ: Can you tell me, were there other people in the community, in this particular community, in the Lewiston and Bates community that also influenced you or your community involvement, or the community in itself substantially that you think is worth mentioning?

EJ: Oh I don't, I don't, I don't think the, I don't think the community did the influencing, I think it was the particular things I was interested in. I think it was the particular things that interested me that got me (*unintelligible word*).

MJ: Were there people along the way who enhanced that?

EJ: Were there what?

MJ: Were there people along the way who enhanced your interest?

EJ: No, I think I stayed set in my ways. I don't think, I think I was a pretty unswerving, let's see, (*leafing through papers*) I got that, and I got that, and I got that. Oh, you know of course that Jean was a trustee of the University of Maine and so forth.

MJ: Yeah, I actually had the opportunity to interview her husband.

EJ: Oh, then you don't need to, I don't think there's anything that, I don't think of anything that I would know that he would have neglected to have covered.

MJ: Can you tell me a little bit about your work in the county jail and helping prisoners earn their GEDs?

EJ: Oh, how did you find out about that? Okay, the county jail. Again, Quakers have always been interested in mental health, county jails, and I find that county jails and mental health are currently much more tied together than they should be. We're not doing what we need to do in mental health locally, it's one of the forgotten things in the. . . . What happened was, I saw in the paper, the paper's always getting me in trouble, that VISTA- you know, the volunteer organization for young people for local jobs instead of, what do they call it when you go abroad, Peace Corps, VISTA was the local- that they had approached the jail people and that the jail people were going to set up a room where they could do educational things. And they were going to paint it and get it all refurbished, etcetera, so I went over, there wasn't anything that told me where to get in touch with the VISTA people, so I went over to the jail and said if they were going to teach that I'd be glad to volunteer too. I told you, I volunteer in Lewiston. So by this time, by the time the VISTA people had finished a term and the room wasn't finished and so if I wanted to run a class, go ahead. So at that time I think the people working in the jails was not a regular thing, but I, the people at the jail were very cooperative. And I was working in adult ed so adult ed loaned me the materials to be able to use for GEDs and instructional materials and so forth. So later it became, I think I'm correct in saying that it is now a state law.

At any rate, the person that's doing it now is paid by adult ed, and it is a paying job and they. But I volunteered a number of years there, and I don't remember when I started and I'm not sure when I stopped. But I used to go, well, a couple of afternoons a week.

MJ: Sounds like that has a lot to do with your views on social justice.

EJ: Yeah.

MJ: And the Quaker perspective. Can you tell me, do you think that the Lewiston and Maine politics have changed over the years?

EJ: Well, you've got to remember that Maine politics is different than, for instance, where I grew up in Pennsylvania. In Pennsylvania you might be lucky if you knew your state senator, but you certainly didn't hobnob with the governor. And, but Maine is slightly over a million people and it is, the only way they get anything on the census for Maine, for a city, is to take greater Portland. Portland itself isn't big enough to be classified as a city under U.S. census. So you've got a very different situation when you're dealing with Maine than you've got when you're dealing with most states. When, so, I mean you just have a more intimate relationship. So why don't we do Muskie while we're in on that one.

MJ: I was just going to ask you, did you have any personal contact with Muskie?

EJ: Yeah, I think there were four, maybe five. At any rate, when I first came to Maine, Brooks Quimby, who was a debate coach here in Maine, and if you don't know about Brooks Quimby you should get to know him because Bates never lost an international debate ever with Brooks Quimby, but I didn't know that of course when I landed. But at any rate, somehow Brooks Quimby was introducing Ed Muskie speaking at one of our local schools and so I went. And I, my first impression of Muskie was that he was Lincolnesque, that he was, had modesty and

intelligence and, gee I should have written the things down because I was thinking of them yesterday and now the words don't come. But at any rate, I was quite impressed with him. The next time that I remember Ed Muskie was at Louis Scolnik's house and talking on the porch and things.

MJ: How, what was that about?

EJ: I don't know. Lou was just entertaining him and he was there. And the next thing is that when he was running for governor he was working on his, now he wouldn't get a platform, his politic-, various political statements at any rate, and he, his position statements, and he, Ed wasn't there but Lou, Shepherd Lee was helping work on his position statements and it, they had a meeting at Shep Lee's house to which I was invited. But Pete was particularly invited because Pete had had a lot of contact with the Maine Indians because, even before we came to Maine, the year we were living in Cambridge, when Pete was post doctoral guest scholar at the Harvard Research Center, he had, the house we were living in had, the AFAC [*?*] director brought Pete to Maine several times to visit the Indians. And after Pete came back, after we moved in Maine, we kept our interest in the Maine Indians.

We were asked one time to take a project at the Maine Indians, and at that time I didn't know enough or didn't feel that, I didn't feel I could make a real contribution to, I couldn't think of what the solution to all their problems could be and if I couldn't see a solution, how could I help them find a solution.

MJ: What was the focal point of the meeting, I'm sorry?

EJ: Hmm?

MJ: What was the focal point of the meeting?

EJ: The meeting was to write Ed Muskie's, he was running for governor, to write his position paper on the Maine Indians.

MJ: Okay, thank you.

EJ: And so John Donovan was there. Now John Donovan taught political science here, then he taught political science at Bowdoin, then John Donovan was Muskie's something or other in his office in Washington, whatever your chief honcho is down there. And so that's how we happened to be there, and that was our contact with that. Now the contact with Ed Muskie that I most enjoyed was the fact that my daughter and I were at the Auburn airport, and I don't know what we were there for, maybe we were meeting Pete coming in or not, but at any rate, Ed Muskie came in.

MJ: This is Karen, your daughter, your daughter is Karen?

EJ: Karen.

MJ: What's her last name?

EJ: Now? Rhoda, R-H-O-D-A. But Karen and I were at the airport and Ed Muskie came in and I was anxious for Karen to have a chance to meet him and I hoped that he would remember who I was and wouldn't . . . . At any rate, what he said was, "It's such a pleasure for me to meet Pete and Elizabeth Jonitis' daughter," instead of me being able to say. So, he had a, first of all he was good about remembering people, but he was very gracious and was, gave my daughter a really nice memory. And I think they're my only contacts with him, except for the fact that we always voted for him.

MJ: So you obviously had very good impressions of him.

EJ: Oh yes, oh yes, absolutely, absolutely. They made a mistake when they didn't vote, didn't vote for him. Anybody that didn't vote for him didn't know good material when they saw it.

MJ: Is there anything else that I haven't asked about that you feel is important that you'd like to talk about?

EJ: Why don't you time out for a second.

MJ: Okay.

(*Tape paused.*)

EJ: . . . . active with the NAACP, Mildred Merman, who, there's a room honoring she and her husband over in your new building, wrote an article, and I think maybe it was two articles that appeared in the magazine section of the Lewiston *Journal* at the time that were on the history of Negroes in Maine. And I used to have a pile of those but I no longer have one and unfortunately I never brought one over here and put it in, but it's something that should be looked up and included. And I think that's all that I can tell.

MJ: Great. Well, thank you very much for your time. I really appreciate it.

EJ: You want me to sign a waiver?

End of Interview