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Interview with Geneva Kirk by Meredith Gethin-Jones

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Kirk, Geneva

Interviewer

Gethin-Jones, Meredith

Date

September 27, 1999

Place

Lewiston, Maine

ID Number

MOH 152

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Biographical Note

Geneva Kirk was born in Lewiston, Maine in 1917. She attended Lewiston High School and Bates College, graduating in the class of 1937 with a major in French. She began her graduate work at Bates and finished at University of Maine, Orono and New York Long Island, earning her master's degree in Education. She worked as a teacher in the Norridgewock school system, then for the Central Maine Medical Center School of Nursing for two years. She worked in the Augusta school system for four or five years, then taught in Lewiston from 1948-1979. She was president of the Lewiston Teachers Association, member of the Maine Teachers Association, on the Board of the Technical College System and the Board of the University College System and on the Maine State Museum Commission. She worked with United Way for 20 years. She has been president of the Maine Retired Teachers' Association.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Bates College; 1954 Maine gubernatorial campaign; Androscoggin River; the Great Depression; Lewiston political atmosphere in the 1930s; attending Bates while living at home; Lewiston/Bates tensions; attitudes of earlier administrators; Professor Ray Gould; Lewiston High School 1944 or 1945 ban on speaking French; French/Irish tensions; shoe shops and strike; effects of World War II; naval training at

Bates College; married women not being able to teach; Lewiston politics in the 1920s and 1930s; Grand Trunk Railroad; Louis Jalbert; CMTK Kirk Auditorium; role of the “Y” in the community; naturalization classes; Muskie’s distinctive voice; and Elder Hostel.

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Transcript

Meredith Gethin-Jones: September 27th, 1999 at one-thirty p.m. in the afternoon, this is an interview with Geneva A. Kirk of 30 Ware Street in Lewiston, Maine, and Meredith Gethin-Jones is interviewing. Could you please state your full name and spell it please?

Geneva Kirk: Well, Geneva is like Geneva, Switzerland, G-E-N-E-V-A, Kirk, K-I-R-K.

MJ: And where and when were you born?

GK: I was born here in Lewiston in 1917.

MJ: And what were your parents' names?

GK: Mary Kirk was a dressmaker, and my father was Chester Kirk, a veterinarian.

MJ: And how many people were in your family growing up?

GK: Just my brother and I.

MJ: And were you an older sibling or a younger sibling?

GK: Older, couple years.

MJ: What's your brother's name?

GK: He has died now, it's Roger Kirk.

MJ: Where did you spend most of your childhood?

GK: Where? Right here, on this street playing with the kids.

MJ: What was Lewiston like in the 1920s and '30s growing up here?

GK: Well, I don't remember such an awful lot about the 1920s, but the 1930s was, I was in high school and in college so I was much more aware of what was going on. And we never, never in this neighborhood suffered from the Depression at all. I suppose everybody had a job. To tell the truth, there were about eight Bates college professors living right around the neighborhood here. And, but we didn't, we weren't hungry and we weren't without jobs and, I don't mean that we were living well, we had to think twice.

I can remember once that my brother wanted a bicycle so very badly and my mother who was a dressmaker said, "Well Roger, if you want to you can take this bill and go up on Main Street to the lady up there for whom I made the dress, and who hasn't paid for it and a long time's gone by, and see if maybe she'll pay you." Oh yes, he'd try. So he went up and he came back empty-handed. So, yes we, there were times when we didn't have what we'd like to have, but we always ate well. Though I can remember that, if I were going to have a birthday party I'd usually say to my mother, "Do you think we could possibly have chicken?" Now you think of it today, chicken is cheaper than beef by a long ways, but chicken was a very great treat for us then.

MJ: Who were some of the major figures in the community back then?

GK: I missed one word, what?

MJ: Who were some of the major figures in the community back then?

GK: Well, I suppose the people in city hall were the, some were, had good reputations and some not so good. I can remember one mayor who was asked once what he would do about the shortage of space in the schools over at Garcelon School, they were overrunning. "Well," he says, "I know where there's some extra benches in the city, I can get those brought in." So we had a run on rather poor quality people at that time, and since then it's changed remarkably. But Governor Louis Brann was here in the city, he lived right around the corner and he was, had been a lawyer here in the city and became governor of the state.

MJ: Do you remember any other people particularly, names?

GK: No, I guess my life centered around the college. Professor [Samuel Frederick] Harms and Professor [Arthur Newton] Leonard and Professor [John Murray] Carroll all up and down the street here, Bates people. That was kind of a narrow circle that I lived in.

MJ: Now where did you attend high school?

GK: Lewiston High School.

MJ: And you attended Bates College.

GK: Yes.

MJ: And what did you major in at Bates?

GK: French.

MJ: I see, why did you choose that major?

GK: This is a poor reason, I guess. I really didn't know what I wanted to do, and one of, my mother was a dressmaker, and one of her customers was Dr. Blanche Townsend, professor of French at Bates. And she'd been here very, very frequently so she urged me to consider French as a major, because it's French community and she thought maybe that would be a good idea. So I said, "Well, just as good anything as far as I'm concerned so I'll major in French." So I did, and was her assistant a couple years. But now I've lost all my French to tell the truth. No one speaks it around here so I just don't have that ability any more. I can read it and understand what people are talking about, but I can't think fast enough to speak it.

MJ: Oh, that's too bad. As a student at Bates College, did you live on or off campus?

GK: Always at home.

MJ: Always here?

GK: Yes, because we just couldn't afford to live on campus.

MJ: Did you find that there was tension or segregation between Lewiston and Bates College?

GK: I never saw it, and I know that people do feel that way. The students, the town students didn't mix too much with the on-campus people. I guess maybe I was an exception because, and perhaps the people who were in the athletic department would have been better acquainted, but I had some church connections with people in my class at college. We had things down there and things here in my home, and visit over on the campus so I didn't find any problem with the students. And yes, there has been until very recent years, a feeling on the part of local people that they weren't wanted on the Bates campus. Although I remember in some of those interviews that Professor [Anne] Williams' students did, the students said, "We went up there to dances on Saturday night, we went to the ball games," but perhaps those were the fewer in number.

MJ: Why do you think there was this segregation?

GK: Because there were administrators at the college who were quite different from the ones we have now. If you touched a spear of grass on the campus, you might not be too welcome. And one man in particular was like that. It was his campus, he was, he went to college there and he was brought up to take care of everything at the college and he didn't want anybody mixing up his campus in any way.

MJ: And who was that, I'm sorry?

GK: He was one of the administrators of the campus. But on the other hand, Professor Gould, who built the house across the street here, served on the Lewiston School Board. So there were those who did participate in local affairs. But not as much as they do now, not by a long ways. I think you can't find many people who equal Dean [James "Jim"] Carignan, really, he goes all out to be accommodating to the city.

MJ: Can you tell me a little bit about the Franco-American population in Lewiston? You mentioned that that was perhaps one of the reasons you became a French major?

GK: Well, it is a, they are a majority, but the, intermarriages now are such that you'd have a hard time, and some of them would, to trace their background. So it's very, very different from what it was. When I was going to high school, well and later on, I, when I first taught at Lewiston High School beginning about 1944 or '5, we were instructed by the administration to not allow any students to speak French in school. If we found them speaking French in the girls room or in the corridors or at recess, tell them to stop, speak English. They wanted them to learn, they sincerely wanted those kids to learn English and speak it well. So they thought that by banning French they were accomplishing that result, which was not necessarily true. And the kids resented it, and I don't blame them. Now there's no such regulation.

MJ: Now, was there segregation between them and other ethnic groups in the community?

GK: Well the Irish and the French never got along together, that's well known, they had real feuds. Along towards the end of it it became more fun than anything else. They'd have annually a French-Irish baseball tournament in the summer, a game. And it was great fun to see who could win that, but I don't know whether the English speaking people cheered the French or the Irish, but it was, that was really more in fun. But yes, as kids when they were growing up they used to have real battles down in what we call Bleachery Hill district, down on the far end of Lisbon Street. The Irish kids having to go through that area to get up to the parochial school, had to run the risk of battery of French kids on the corner waiting for them. But I don't think the adults ever were as miserable about it as the kids were, it was part of the game for them.

MJ: When was this?

GK: Oh, in the 1920s and '30s.

MJ: Was there segregation between the Franco-American population and Bates College?

GK: Well the French people just plainly didn't go to Bates College. Partly because they couldn't afford to, but also because there were French institutions, many of them went to Canada to go to school. So there wasn't any, there wasn't any, well I had three French, Franco-American students in my class at Bates, so some did go. But it was usually the ones who could afford it rather than anybody and everybody.

MJ: How did the community change as the mills in this area and the surrounding area closed down?

GK: Well they went through a good many years of depression, not just associated with the American, the United States Depression, but a depression in the city. And we've only recently come out of it. You see in the Bates Mill what's happening there. When you think about how many thousand people used to work in those mills and pour out of there at four o'clock every afternoon, and then it got to the point where there was nothing in there at all except one small area being used. So, yes, it's been rough to cope with that here in Lewiston.

But we've got a mayor now who really talks positively and a lot of people like Dean Carignan who are on committees, and they always look on the bright side of life and know that we can recuperate from the depression we've been in. We didn't have any people on the street corners, you know, as you read about in New York City, people selling apples on the street corner to make a living or something. There wasn't ever that, but it's just, and some of the mothers would say, well if they had an extra somebody to feed, they just cooked an extra potato and put it in the stew, or put a little more water in to make it go farther. But they weren't suffering, they just didn't enjoy life because they didn't have any extras or extracurricular activities.

MJ: Do you remember the Bates Mill closing, can you tell me . . . ?

GK: Oh yes, hm-hmm, and the shoe shops, that was a terrible blow, when the shoe shops closed

down. They had a major strike that finished them off and they just, management closed down instead of trying to struggle with the unions.

MJ: So the strike was because?

GK: They wanted to unionize and the management wouldn't accept them. Now there's a local, there's been a local union. That was an attempt to get into a national union which would give them force, let's say, but eventually they created a Lewiston-Auburn union just specifically for the people here, and that the management would endure.

MJ: How did WWII affect this area?

GK: A great many people went to work in the Bath shipyards and related industries. Perhaps if they didn't have a job in any of the mills or factories here, that was a good opportunity to earn a good living down there, so the commuters were very numerous going to Bath and Brunswick.

MJ: How did WWII affect the college?

GK: Well, the college was pretty well loaded with people because we had a, goodness sakes, I've forgotten what, well, a group of men were trained on the Bates campus for the Navy [V-12 program], I don't remember what it was called, but yes, there were. And they had barracks we called them over there about where the present grandstand is, and they could bring their families and live there. Many of them were from out of town, they weren't local people, but this was simply a training ground, as the Auburn airport was for the Air Force. They had Canadians over there, we, these were American folks. And some of them came, a few of them I know of came back to college after they had finished in the service. They'd been acquainted with the Bates campus and the community so they chose to come back here to college.

MJ: Did the war affect the school system in general?

GK: I don't think so. We had some students who left and went into the service, but no, no problem.

MJ: While you were growing up and began teaching, what was Lewiston like socially?

GK: Well I didn't start to teach here, I taught in two other places before I came back here to teach. But, well one problem was that married women couldn't teach, they wouldn't hire them. And if they were teaching and married, they just were dropped, they were left. The city didn't want to support families, and so they wouldn't support a married woman, so that was a problem. We always had sufficient teachers and perfectly well qualified teachers, but women felt badly that they couldn't stay on after they were married.

MJ: That was a law?

GK: No, a school board regulation. Maybe nowadays with all the labor unions they wouldn't be allowed to do that sort of thing, but teachers weren't unionized then so they couldn't use any

force to maintain their positions.

MJ: Interesting. When you were younger, say right before college, what were some of the social activities that you were involved in here in Lewiston, or your friends?

GK: Well, of course I had a lot of years in Girl Scouts, no, for myself, in Campfire Girls, which isn't as popular now as it used to be, I don't know why, but I was in that for a long, long while. And then when I began to teach here, Girl Scouts had come along and I served on the board and had a troop there. A lot of my activity was in the church, the Calvary Methodist Church which they call the church in the triangle down on the corner of Sabattus and College Street, and we had a great many church activities going on.

The girls, we had a bridge club, that sounds kind of silly now, you see adults having bridge clubs, but the girls had, we had oh, probably, twelve regulars let's say, three tables of bridge. So we'd have a bridge club meeting might be once in two weeks. And I guess it was the very same people who celebrated one another's birthdays. We would make it a point to get everybody's birthday and have a dinner. And I can remember saying to my mother, show you how, that we were poor, if we were going to have a, I was going to have a birthday party, I'd say, "Mother, do you think we could perhaps have chicken?" because chicken was so expensive then. Now it's about one of the cheapest things. "Oh, if we could have a chicken dinner that would be really super."

MJ: You mentioned church in the community, were many people involved in the church community in Lewiston?

GK: Yes, because all the French people and all the Irish people would be absolutely sure they were at Mass every Sunday, at the churches. There weren't the variety of denominations that we have now. Oh, I could, I'm sure there must be ten or twelve that have started up in the last ten years. But we had the old standard ones, the Baptists and the Congregationalists and the Universalists and the Presbyterians and Episcopalians, but we didn't have the multitude of denominations that exist here today.

MJ: Did the Irish and the French have different churches, or did they congregate together?

GK: They did have separate churches, yes, but that was the choice that the families made, which one they went to in their neighborhood. But St. Patrick's is absolutely an Irish church and St. Peter's is absolutely a French church, but now people have mixed so much from intermarriage that they don't pay any attention any more to it.

MJ: What was Lewiston like growing up from an economic perspective?

GK: Well, everybody pinched pennies to make, to have some success in life. The French people didn't make any great attempt to send their kids to college. Because I can remember even when I was teaching here that some of the fathers, if we talked with them through the guidance department would say, "Oh no," they weren't going to send the daughter to college. "She'd just get married and that would be a waste of good money," so they wouldn't bother to educate

the girls.

And there were a good many French organizations. Perhaps more of the Protestant people would have joined, say, the Shrine and the Business and Professional Womens' Club and such as that, while the French people joined St. John Baptiste and their other organizations, La (*unintelligible word sounds like: Sous Evance*) Francaise for the women and so forth. So they didn't mix particularly.

I can remember, he's still living, he's ninety-two years old I think, Mr. Wade in Auburn, I saw him Sunday. He has been singing always with a French mens' choral group, and the only English speaking man in the whole bunch but they liked him and he got along with everybody and so he, and he still sings with them once in a while. Perhaps all they do is sing at, for funeral masses or something like that, they don't do concerts any more. I saw him Sunday at church and he's going strong. He graduated from Bates. He's about the oldest living Bates graduate now, I think.

MJ: What was his first name?

GK: Robert Wade.

MJ: Robert Wade. And, can you tell me a little bit about Lewiston from a political perspective back in the 1920s and the 1930s?

GK: It was pretty dirty politics here.

MJ: Were there.

GK: Pretty bad.

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

GK: Well, I suppose it was true in a lot of places. When people were desperately poor they, and they saw a chance to make a dollar they did. There were people who, shall we say, raided the welfare department. They took food and things that they weren't entitled to at all. The school board was so bad that the state took over the operation of the schools in Lewiston because they were selling jobs. I don't know that they did for teachers, but if a man wanted a job as a janitor he had to pay an alderman or a school board member, oh, fifty dollars or something in order to get the job.

MJ: So there was quite a bit of bribing going on.

GK: Oh yes, that sort of thing. It reached the point where the city just fell apart and the state government had to step in and straighten things out a little bit for them. And after that they began to pick up and I guess were ashamed of themselves for what they'd done, and we haven't had any problems since that I know anything about.

MJ: Was the community primarily Democratic or Republican?

GK: Well it was Republican originally but it turned Democratic with, a good share of the French people were Democrats. They were shoe shop and mill workers and unionized and the union people were generally Democrats.

MJ: Why do you think it changed from predominantly Republican to Democratic, what was the cause of the change?

GK: Well, the growth in the Democratic Party, in the French population.

MJ: When did the French population escalate?

GK: Oh, before the Depression they had come in in great numbers to work in the mills. They came by droves from Montreal, Quebec area.

MJ: Did they hear that there were jobs open in the mills and so forth?

GK: One man might come and get a job and bring his family, and then his wife's family would learn about it and they would pack up and come. They used to talk about how the railroad station down on old Lincoln Street was the entry to the city. They'd come down from Canada on the Grand Trunk Railroad and get off out on Lincoln Street and there were all these apartment houses down there. And somebody would have an apartment and take them in for a few weeks until they could get one of their own. They had big, big families, big families.

MJ: When the mills closed down did many of the Franco-Americans leave?

GK: Oh no, uh-uh, they never went back to Quebec or Montreal. No, no, never.

MJ: So what did they do when the mills closed down and they were out of work?

GK: Just find anything to do, something. Of course a lot of them were on welfare, but no, they knew that going back to Canada was no solution to their employment problem.

MJ: What was Lewiston like from a cultural perspective back during the Depression and around those years?

GK: Well, we didn't have very much going on and that's why things like, today Lewiston-Auburn Arts, the L-A Arts programs is amazing, it's grown tremendously, but I can remember when it started.

MJ: When did it start?

GK: Oh, nineteen-forty, nineteen-fiftyish, because somebody made the comment, I suppose I knew at the time who, that 'Lewiston was a cultural desert', somebody in Portland. And well, I

guess they weren't going to be insulted by being called that so they, get busy and do something. So we started L-A Arts down in the basement of the public library, and it just started from a little monthly meeting with twenty or so people until it's a nationally recognized arts group now.

MJ: So what are some of the other dramatic sociocultural changes that you've seen over the years in the Lewiston community, in addition to L-A Arts?

GK: Well, we've got a lot more interest in preservation, historic preservation, than we did have. And of course a lot of, we've got a lot of problems now because we didn't tend to it when we should have. I know professor [Doug] Hodgkins [*sic* Hodgkin] has a group working on that. And they're going to do a program for the historical society in a month or so about Main Street, from Lisbon Street up to Mountain Avenue, sort of a birds eye view of the buildings that are still left standing. But every once in a while one gets knocked down, like Dr. Flanders' house recently, and the hospital tore down the beautiful little stone Lutheran church. And so we've lost a lot of nice buildings.

Then, oh, just a few months ago they took the tower off of the Androscoggin mill. And when that went down people had seven fits about it, but yet the money isn't there to preserve them and keep them going as they are. But we've come to realize that we have a lot more here than many communities. We've got a load of buildings in this, these two cities on the historic preservation, no, well, it's under the federal historic preservation commission, a lot of nice buildings. We have a good many, good architects here in the city that planned them.

MJ: What were some of the economic changes that you've seen over the years, say between the Depression years and now? I know that that's a long period of time, but what sort of changes have occurred in terms of standard of living and jobs and so forth?

GK: Well, it's happened very slowly but right now the unemployment rate here in Lewiston is very, very low, very low. And so that, the recovery from the Bates mill's closing hasn't been as bad as it might have been, they've picked up and filled spots with other kinds of industries. So that problem is never solved permanently, there'll be another business that'll fold up and go out and you have to scramble to find jobs for those people, but.

And we've got a lot more kids in school and in college than we used to have, not just because the population has grown, because the population did drop at one point, but it's back up now. But there's money enough now to send their kids to college and there are enough scholarships available from various sources, so that most anybody with any ability and desire can go to college now. And look, we've got Central Maine Technical College which is filling the bill for lots of folks who want a two-year program, we've got a Lewiston-Auburn division of the university.

I can remember, I was on the board of the university [Lewiston-Auburn College] when that started. We had, I can remember people up in Presque Isle, we went up there for a meeting, were highly impressed with two of the young men from Lewiston who went up to present to the board their desire for a college here. And they said to me afterward, "Gee, if you've got any more fellows like that down in Lewiston, why don't you bring them to some of the meetings." They

were greatly impressed with these young French lawyers that came up to present their case.

MJ: This was University of Maine?

GK: Mmm, hmm-hmm. So we've got lots of opportunities for education now.

MJ: What sort of industries replaced the shoe shops and the Bates mill?

GK: Well, there are still shoe shops but of a different variety. There are machine shops, there's some big printing businesses here. I can't think what other ones, well, nothing else comes to mind particularly. Should, but I don't know the people who run them so I don't, am not too familiar with it. And of course the banking business employs a lot of people, with the coming of that bank downtown, with two hundred people just overnight so to speak gone to work down there. It takes a lot of, takes care of a lot of needs.

MJ: Was your family politically affiliated?

GK: No. Well, my father, I'm sure he never voted ever, ever, ever, but my mother was a Republican. She was quite horrified with I enrolled in the Democratic Party.

MJ: So you are politically affiliated?

GK: Yes.

MJ: Why did you choose to enroll in the Democratic Party?

GK: I was so hopping mad at somebody at the time, I don't know, because they had ruined the salary system of, for the teachers and it hurt pretty badly. And so I says, "Oh, I'll have nothing to do with those Republicans any more, I'll vote Democratic."

MJ: Was that Richard Nixon?

GK: It must have been, I'm not sure just which one, but probably so.

MJ: So is that how you decided to become active in politics, or were you politically affiliated before that?

GK: No, that's when I started working. But I was president of the Lewiston Teacher's Association, and then president of the Maine Teacher's Association. We had to get into politics there to get the things we wanted, like paid vacations and all these goodies that you have now in contracts, that we never used to have.

MJ: How else were you active in politics, what sort of things did you push for?

GK: Well, I served on the board of both the technical college system and the university college

system, both of those. And then I served on the Maine State Museum Commission, and that's a political appointment by the governor.

MJ: What was your impression of the political atmosphere in Lewiston in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly during the Great Depression?

GK: Well, I wasn't old enough in the '20s to know what was going on, but I was, in the '30s when I had graduated from college and talking about trying to find a job, my mother would have liked to have me right here because she wasn't very well and so forth. And I, so many people I can remember saying, "Well, if you just pay fifty dollars to so-and-so, you can get a job in the Lewiston school system." But I said, "No, I'll go up to Norridgewock instead, work for less and enjoy it."

MJ: Who were some of, I think you touched on this a little bit, but who were some of the important political figures during the Great Depression?

GK: Here in town?

MJ: Yes.

GK: I don't remember, except for Governor Brann, anybody particularly.

MJ: What were some of the things that he allocated?

GK: Well, of course, he was a man with a good education and his children had, he was concerned about that. And he got interested in state affairs through his connection with Lewiston affairs. Oh, I don't, I wasn't paying that much attention to politics at the time.

MJ: Are you familiar with Louis Jalbert?

GK: Very much so. Louis always called me at seven o'clock every morning before I went to school. He knew if he called at seven, he'd get me before I started out the door. And he always had something that he wanted to know or something he wanted to tell me. Every blasted morning he'd call, seven o'clock, "Oh, Louis' here, got to take care of him." I liked Louis, he worked very hard for people. He was kind of a blustery soul but he was good-hearted.

MJ: What sorts of things was he involved with?

GK: Well around here he was much concerned about the technical college system, that's why one of the buildings is named for him, Jalbert Hall. Another building over there is named for me, it's Kirk Auditorium.

MJ: Are you familiar with Bill Jacques?

GK: Jacques we call him here.

MJ: Is that how that's pronounced?

GK: Well, not very much, he's still in the radio and electrical business as far as I know, but I don't know too much about him.

MJ: What about John Beliveau?

GK: Well, he's my neighbor so I know John.

MJ: And he's quite politically active, right?

GK: Yes, yes.

MJ: Can you tell me a little bit about that, and his action?

GK: I can't, I couldn't name where anything that he did particularly during his term, but he's a well educated man and of course he's a judge in the court system now. So he, and his family were all interested in what was going on.

MJ: How has the political atmosphere changed between back then and now? You mentioned that it went from Republican to Democrat, but do you remember some later political figures that influenced Lewiston in a particular area or field or?

GK: Well, we had one woman mayor, Lillian Caron, who really put her heart and soul into the job, not that she was particularly slanted toward one political party. The Lewiston city government isn't politically based, there's no indication of Democratic or Republican on a ballot. They're just running on their own. So we don't have any feeling that the Republicans are running the show or the Democrats. They used to, but not since we have a new charter. Well it isn't very new now but in the 1930s we got a new charter and it's been revised a couple of times since then.

MJ: Can you tell me a little bit about how Edmund Muskie helped Lewiston as governor, and then as senator?

GK: I don't know of anything in particular that he did. Whatever was done for the state, like his concern with, you might say he saved the Androscoggin River, but I don't know of any other things. The river was a horrible, horrible mess, but he was determined to get pure air and pure water and he got it, finally.

MJ: He certainly did, didn't he?

GK: Because one of the Bates professors was the river master for years, Professor [Walter] Lawrance was, controlled the Androscoggin River, the whole length of it from start to finish.

MJ: What was he a professor of?

GK: Chemistry I assume, and he used Bates students in the summer to monitor the program and to, well they'd go up the river to dump in whatever it was, some, a chemical that was needed to balance the river. And so he did that right up to almost until he died, must have been river master for twenty years or so. And that was always a Bates summer program for chemistry students.

MJ: Can you tell me a little bit about how the community reacted to Muskie becoming so successful, particularly the college?

GK: Well, no, I, the man who helped him win the election was Frank Morey Coffin, who was another Bates graduate. And Frank lived right up around the corner here so people were, you know, enthusiastically supported him but I don't think they got out and waved the flag terribly.

MJ: How did Lewiston react to him becoming so successful, knowing that he went to college here and?

GK: They would never particularly mention it, no. They were just happy, they liked him and pleased that he was elected, and that Frank had worked so hard to get him in. Because Ed Muskie was in the legislature and doing a lot of complaining about things and Frank Coffin said, "Well, why don't you run for governor and fix it up then." So, "Well, I will if you'll help me." So they got together and went on a campaign.

MJ: How did Frank help Ed?

GK: Organizing his campaign. They traveled together, get in the car and go hither and yon to speak to groups. But Frank was, I suppose we'd call him nowadays the campaign manager, probably. Frank became, I think he's retired now, but he's been the judge of the circuit court in Boston for years.

MJ: Now, did Frank Coffin attend Bates College as well?

GK: Yes, he did.

MJ: I thought so. Did you find Bates to be politically active?

GK: No, no.

MJ: What were some of your activities when you attended Bates? You mentioned that you were involved in the church community.

GK: Well, I belonged to two groups, I don't know if they exist now or not, Der Deutsche Verein for the German students, German club, and French club I belonged to. The Y, the Y then was one Y, it wasn't as it is now. I don't know that the Y is very active at Bates or not, whether

they have other things that supplanted that.

MJ: The YMCA?

GK: Hmm-hmm.

MJ: Not that I know of.

GK: I don't think so, but it was very, very strong. They Y, the two Ys, the mens' and the womens' we did, went out and did a lot of visiting in communities around us here.

MJ: What sorts of things did the Y sponsor?

GK: Well, programs for, locally for women for instance, who were taking naturalization classes or something that, people who had come in from Canada or hither and yon and needed some assistance educationally. I remember that the boys' had more to do with athletic events than the girls' did. I don't think there were any, I don't remember any athletic events for girls in connection with the Y.

MJ: When did you graduate from Bates?

GK: Thirty-seven [1937].

MJ: And who are some of the people that you remember from your Bates experience?

GK: The people that I remember. Well, I remember Professor Gould very well. Ed Muskie sat right in front of me in Professor Gould's class. And I had a hard time to see because Ed was so tall and so big that I had to, if I wanted to see Professor Gould, I had to crane my neck out around Ed to see what was going on there.

MJ: Did you know Ed Muskie when you were at Bates?

GK: Oh yes. He was a friend of two of my cousins from up in Rumford. And one cousin was down here at Bates when Ed was here and lived next door to me, and he used to bring Ed over to visit a little bit.

MJ: What were your cousins' names?

GK: Marchant Hall was the one who was going to Bates at the time, he went only one year, then he transferred to Boston. But he was a, I think he was a debater with Ed in the schools in Rumford, and so they had been friends for quite some time.

MJ: And your other cousin?

GK: No, he was living in another town and went other ways to school later, I don't think they

had much connection after that.

MJ: I'm sorry, what was your other cousin's name?

GK: Ivan Thomas. But I had, I talked with Marchant on the phone just a couple weeks ago, he's in Maryland now. I had to report to him on the death of a couple relatives, so we talked about the good old days. But they used to get together on the weekends because they didn't have much money to spend on entertainment. So they'd just chew the rag and talk about the good old days debating.

MJ: Do you have any personal recollections of Ed Muskie at Bates, in particular?

GK: No, except that, the one thing I still think about with him once in a while is his speech. He always had a distinctive voice and a speech, and he kept it all his life. And every word he spoke you could understand. It was just fascinating to listen to him. In class when he asked a question or made a comment to Professor Gould, you'd know it was Ed Muskie talking, there was no question about it. And as a speaker, he was a super speaker, wonderful.

MJ: Did you find him very personable?

GK: Oh yes, indeed.

MJ: And what sort of student was he?

GK: I don't, really don't think he was, I don't remember whether he was a Phi Beta Kappa student or not but he was an excellent student. I don't know what his final-

MJ: Now you spoke about the debate a little bit, was the debate team very popular to-?

GK: Hmm-hmm, for a small group of people, not, I never had anything to do with it here in college. I did in high school, but yes it was. Professor Quimby was here at that time and, what's named for him, the Quimby something-or-other. I don't know, it isn't a building, but, well anyway, he was Bates debate coach for years and years and years and years.

MJ: Well isn't the debate team, isn't it the Quimby something debate team?

GK: It probably is called that.

MJ: I think so. So did students attend some of the debates, was it sort of popular to watch, or?

GK: Not really, not really.

MJ: It was very selective?

GK: No, not as much as now.

MJ: What did you do when you first left Bates College after you graduated in 1937?

GK: Well I went to the town of Norridgewock to teach, it's up near Skowhegan.

MJ: And you chose to leave there because of the political tension in Lewiston?

GK: No, it's just, you had to get a job anywhere you could then, jobs were scarce.

MJ: And what did you teach?

GK: Oh, I taught everything under the sun. We had English, I mean French and algebra, two years of French and algebra, history, government, I had six different subjects. I've forgotten what the other, oh, civics I supposed, civics and history and so forth, social studies and French. Then I went to, I worked for Central Maine Medical Center School of Nursing for two years, and then I went to Augusta for four or five years before I came down here to teach.

MJ: Could you hang on one moment, I'm going to just stop the tape and turn it over.

End of Side A

Side B

MJ: This is side B of an interview with Geneva Kirk. Could you tell me a little bit more about some of your teaching experiences in Augusta and Lewiston?

GK: Well, when I taught at the hospital, I enjoyed that because I was not only teaching in the school of nursing but I supervised the nurses, student nurse housing situation, so I got acquainted with a different group of people from what I would ordinarily. I remember some of those nurses coming in and staying just until the probationary period was over and then they went. They had been fascinated by the nice white uniforms and so forth and it just was too hard work, they didn't want to stay. But in, I had variety in Norridgewock but I guess I probably got to know the kids best by the noon hour. At lunch we all, that was a school which had twelve grades in it, right through from first to twelfth grade.

MJ: Which school, I'm sorry?

GK: It was a high school in Norridgewock which doesn't exist any more, but it was interesting because you'd have all the children of a family there. And if you had a problem with one of the little ones, you could go find the older brother or sister to solve the problem. We went to all the basketball games and had a good time, we really lived with those families. I, at the end of the year I'd take Girl Scouts camping out at the lake near there and stayed for a week. But you can't do that sort of thing in a big school.

MJ: So it was a very small community?

GK: Yes, hmm-hmm. I've been back there a great deal to visit. And one of the women who

was born and brought up in Norridgewock came here to Lewiston to teach with me in the high school. And she lived here in the house with us for over twenty-five years, so we've kept our connections with Norridgewock.

MJ: Can you tell me a little bit about teaching at Lewiston High School?

GK: Well, I taught social studies all the time, except for one year I think when I taught algebra, and I had a good time doing that. And I still see some of the people I had in that class, some of the boys particularly are here in town.

MJ: Who are they?

GK: Who are they? Well, there's a fellow who runs a, let me see, Lewiston Engraving I think it's called, they make trophies and that sort of thing. So, and, algebra was the only thing I ever taught except social studies. But I still see a lot of the people that I had. And sometimes I don't know their names any more because the girls are married, and if I see them in the grocery store I have to say, "Well what was your maiden name?" and then they get me straightened out. Or once in a while I get a call from somebody to go to a funeral. I felt so bad, one of the girls that I liked so much died in Puerto Rico last, about six months ago. Her mother was having such a hard time to find anybody to speak at the funeral, which they were having here. And she said "Oh, I think Geneva had her in school." So I went over to speak at the funeral that day.

MJ: So have you lived in Maine your entire life?

GK: Yes, oh yes.

MJ: Have you had encounters with Ed Muskie over the years? I know you had encounters with him in college.

GK: No, not to ask him for any service or anything. I've seen him at, there have been affairs at Bates when he's been back to speak and I'd see him then, but no, I don't have any connection.

MJ: What was your impression of him through these encounters at Bates?

GK: Well, I just knew that he was a hard, hard worker and very sincere about whatever he was doing. You could count on him to do what he said he was going to, except he didn't quite make the presidency.

MJ: How does Lewiston compare to other communities in Maine from a political perspective?

GK: Oh, we're notorious for being politically minded.

MJ: Really.

GK: Yeah, they, if anybody says where do you find the Democrats, oh you go to Lewiston.

Lewiston, Saco or Biddeford, and Waterville. Of course Ed Muskie came from Waterville [*sic* Rumford (he had a law practice in Waterville at the time he entered state politics)].

MJ: What are the political spheres like in other communities, are they Republican?

GK: Maine's essentially a Republican state, yes.

MJ: And how does Lewiston compare to other communities from a social perspective?

GK: Well, we've made a lot of improvements in the last ten or twelve years, because Portland used to look down its nose at us. We were up in the back woods and they had museums and what not, and we didn't have anything. But now that L-A Arts has made its name, a name for itself statewide, they appreciate us a little bit more than they did.

MJ: Lewiston has had a number of economic difficulties over the years I gather, from the Bates mill closing and so forth, but how does it compare to other small communities in Maine? Is it relatively well off or just the opposite?

GK: No, it's, for instance the employment, unemployment rate is very, very low in Lewiston right now, very low.

MJ: What about in other parts of Maine?

GK: Well, compared to these other ones, yeah, oh yeah, we're getting along fine now with the coming of some of these units of the banks and things opening up down in the old mill. No, we're doing all right now.

MJ: After you lived in Augusta, you chose to return to Lewiston, right? Why did you choose to come back here?

GK: My mother wasn't well, she needed somebody here. Going back and forth every week to Augusta, I had to take the bus, it isn't easy, and to get room and board out. I had wonderful families to live with, that wasn't any problem, but it just isn't as easy as camping out at home.

MJ: Did you attend graduate school?

GK: Pardon?

MJ: Did you attend graduate school?

GK: Yeah, I got my masters degree from Bates, but it was at a time when you couldn't finish at Bates. I had started, and I probably had two-thirds of the credits. And then I had to finish by going to University of Maine in Orono, and to New York on Long Island to get credits to finish it off. And Bates accepted those because they hadn't, they weren't giving degrees any longer.

MJ: When did Bates stop giving masters degrees?

GK: Well, let's see. I graduated in '37. Oh, just about 1950, somewhere along in there.

MJ: Do you know why?

GK: Yes, the universities got a corner on student, particularly teachers, and they could offer such a wide variety of courses that Bates couldn't keep up with that. So they turned instead to doing the things they're doing now, having seminars of one kind or another, you know, just a week at a And what's the program for retired people? That's my problem, I just can't get the words sometimes. It's for older people but I can't think, Elder Hostel, they do things, special short-term things instead of six weeks of classes. I can remember that always opened up just about the 4th of July.

And, well there's a tree across the street, do you know what a catalpa is? Well, just turn around, see that big tree there with those great big leaves right straight across? Well that has the most gorgeous blossoms you ever hope to see around the 4th of July. And the new people coming into Bates would be walking around the neighborhood to see what there was. And they'd come by and look at that and everybody would stop, look at that, 'did you ever see one of those?' And my mother quite often would be sitting on the front porch and they'd look at her, she'd say, "That's a catalpa." "A what?" And then she'd explain to them. So they got acquainted with the neighborhood pretty well by just walking around and around here. But they were mostly teachers, to tell the truth, who came to summer school here, almost all teachers.

MJ: And so the Bates summer program offered masters degrees, is that how it worked?

GK: Yes, they did.

MJ: I see. What did you get your masters degree in?

GK: Well, it had to be in education because I couldn't get lined up with enough credits in French or anything else, and so I had to use an assortment and it's a masters in, of education.

MJ: Why did you choose to become a teacher?

GK: I don't know. Everybody, almost all my friends were. I've got to have a doctors degree from Bates, too. They don't give any any more.

MJ: Interesting. So you're Dr. Kirk.

GK: Yup, Dr. Kirk.

MJ: Who were some of your students that went on to become influential in the Lewiston community?

GK: Well, probably John Beliveau might be the best known person, because of his being mayor and judge and that. Edward Bailey isn't here any more, he's teaching in the University of Puerto Rico, but he was a good student. One that I think a lot of, she [Terry Silber] and her husband have a farm up in the town of, well, just beyond, Sumner it must be, and she works for a publishing house in Boston. But they bought an old, old farm that wasn't being used and they have developed it into an experimental display place and they sell seedlings and what not. But then they run courses in, well, let me see, what do we call it, hmm, preservation of flowers, but I can't think of the right word I want. But they're one day courses and they're just, everybody loves them that knows anything about agriculture and that doesn't seem as though that was. He's a, was a Russian fellow and his folks came to Boston I think, and that's where she got acquainted with him. And he writes, I've read last week a book that he had done with another, a Bates professor who's retired long ago, Professor Healy, and they did a fascinating history of the town of Sumner. And Mark Silber did the photography and George Healy did the interviewing of the people whose lives are portrayed there, and the basic history of the town.

MJ: What were the couples' names, I'm sorry?

GK: It's Terry and Mark Silber, S-I-L-B-E-R. Mark is a graduate of Boston University and that's how he got acquainted, I guess, with Terry. She went up there to work in Boston.

MJ: What were you involved in when you left Bates, when you began teaching? Were there organizations that you joined and participated in?

GK: Well I've always worked until recent years for the Girl Scouts, and whatever church I was located near.

MJ: What do you feel are the most influential groups in Lewiston?

GK: Well, there are some womens' groups that are well known. La (*unintelligible word sounds like: Sous Evance*) Francaise is a women's group, the Women's Literary Union in Auburn, is located in Auburn but it has members from all around, is a very strong group. I think probably the church organizations are as strong as any, because they have some continuity there with the ministers or the priests who are, like the, I belong to the High Street Church in Auburn. And we do a tremendous amount for community agencies, supporting them, and every month we get another call from somebody who needs some help.

And then there's a children's foundation in Auburn that gives a lot of attention and money to agencies. I had a call from them, I used to work for them some time ago, and I had a call this last spring, they said, "We've got some spare money. You have any schools in Lewiston that have a great need?" And I said, "Oh Lord, yes." So I went over to the middle school and talked with the nurse over there. And she told me about the problem she has: there are so many kids who come to school with lice and they, a kit that their mother would have to buy at the drug store to treat them is twelve dollars. Most of them haven't got twelve dollars. Or, if they start and use it and they don't see any more lice, they quit using it, and you've got to use it two weeks or something to make it effective. So she said, "I really need some money to buy some of those lice kits to solve the problem." And she said, "You'd be surprised at the number of kids who

don't have but one pair of socks to their name and they'll come to school with them dripping wet and sit all day with wet socks on." Or the girls haven't got any money. They can't buy a bra and they look as though they needed to have one. So she said, "Yes, we need money."

So we let her have five hundred dollars and she doesn't have to tell us who she spent it on, but just give us the receipts. That's all. So then we started doing the same for the Longley School and try to solve, they aren't big amounts but it helps. And I work for United Way all the time. I have for twenty years now.

MJ: Can you tell me a little bit about United Way?

GK: Oh, I know a lot about United Way. I'm sitting here reading today, we have an application in from the, well it's a combination, it's the Merrill Hill Parenting, what's the right word for that, well I don't, I can't see it now. There's an alternative school in Auburn, the Franklin School, where they decided that they'd better do something about the pregnant teens and, because they're giving them their education but they needed some classes for them on how to handle pregnancies and abortions and so forth. Well, they've found that there's a great need for that in other places, so they're collaborating with Central Maine Medical Center which provides a lot of equipment, as well as personnel to help them. And they're running a child care center for the girls who, pregnant teens who have got these children that have got to be cared for.

So they have just put in an application with United Way for funding because some of their sources of money were sort of one-time things. And you can't year after year count on these same businesses or people to provide the funds, so they're asking United Way to fund them so that they'll have a reliable source of money. I don't know whether we're going to or not, but I serve on the committee that determines who becomes, which agencies become members. And we, every three years we review the whole, their whole financial status, their legal status, everything about them to see that they're keeping up to scratch. So we're doing some new ones right now but we, then I have promised to help with the renewal of another one this fall.

MJ: So what exactly is the United Way?

GK: Well it's a money raising organization, but it's an attempt to unify all of the money raising in one place so that people aren't hit every time they turn around with a need. But that doesn't stop all these people from sending you stuff in the mail. I swear, every day there's another request for money in the mail. But the big agencies belong to United Way, and so it's a unified approach, every September, to fund raising. Last year we went way over our quota, and this year we expect to do the same.

MJ: How do you fund raise?

GK: Mostly in the payroll deductions in the mills and the factories and the offices. There's appeals made to individuals, like to all the retired people but it's awfully hard to keep track of them after they've retired, they aren't on anybody's list. But we've, all the retired teachers we have corralled. I have that entire list so I can send a special letter to the retired teachers saying, 'don't forget what you used to do and keep on doing it now.'

MJ: How does United Way influence the Lewiston community and the surrounding area particularly? You mentioned the pregnant teenagers program at CMMC.

GK: Well we have about twenty-five different agencies that are part of United Way. Because it's for Androscoggin County, it isn't just for Lewiston-Auburn, it's Androscoggin County. But the both Ys belong, and Abused Womens' Advocacy Program [AWAP], Community Concepts. You, you've got a lot of these agencies that have names that don't mean anything to you. Unless you are connected with them, you wouldn't have any idea what in the world they were doing, such as Community Concepts, but they're dealing with people who need repairs on their houses and can't afford it, and folks who need rides to the hospital and haven't any way to get there, and so forth.

There's one we're considering right now, it's an agency up in Turner that packs things for, I think it's a drug company, they do the packing up there, getting things ready to mail. And it's a place for mentally handicapped people who can sit and do that, but they can't think things through. And they're asking for membership and we're questioning whether we should or not, because they've got money coming in from the drug companies they work for. And they could just charge them a little bit more and not have to take money away from somebody who hasn't any other source.

MJ: How did you become involved in so much community volunteer work?

GK: Oh, I think just, one thing just leads to another. If you work for one agency, they'll say, like the other day they were short of some people at the committee I work on in United Way, and they said, "You've got to think up some more people." So we started thinking and I said, "Well, I'll give you three names, they're people I've worked with on other agencies. Mr. Gardiner has just finished working for Androscoggin Home Health so it's time he took on another job. And Mrs. Eisemann, Gracia Eisemann works for the historical commission but, and so she does-, her children aren't home any more, she's got time to spare." So, one brings another. We have a hard time to get men to volunteer, though. After they've retired, you'd think they would do something like that, but they might try it for a year, "No, I guess not, I got to go to a golf tournament" or something or other. They don't seem to want to do any work, they want to play.

MJ: That's too bad.

GK: It is. But now, Bob Gardiner for instance, he's worked like a dog for Androscoggin Home Health for three years now raising funds every year, and he's really good at it, but most of the men don't want to do it.

MJ: Did you accept any leadership positions through your volunteer work? It sounds to me as if you've done?

GK: Accept what?

MJ: Leadership positions? It sounds to me like you've done a lot of leadership.

GK: Been president of the Maine Teacher's Association and the Maine Retired Teacher's Association, and I served on the university and the technological college board, and I served on the State Museum Commission.

MJ: Why, you said that just one thing led to another, but did, is there a reason behind your volunteering? Did you, were you influenced by people or things?

GK: Well, I'll tell you, Bates College, I think the professors kept reminding us that if you had a good education you owed it to society to return some of that.

MJ: Were there any particular professors that influenced you in that way?

GK: Oh, probably Professor Gould as much as anybody. Professor [Raymond L.] Kendall, too, he was in the education department, he supervised the student teachers. There are many more of them right now doing something in the community than there were ten years ago. There was a time when nobody ever heard of the Bates professors, they wouldn't know their names if you mentioned them. I think Jim Carignan probably is the one who's incited a lot of them to get busy and get into community affairs.

MJ: Do you have any other memories or recollections about Bates College or Maine, or the history of the Lewiston community that you would like to share that I didn't really cover in any of the questions?

GK: Well, the Bates people have, the town people have learned in recent years that they can go up to Bates College now. My usual comment if there's somebody that says well it's not a very hospitable, I say now look, every time I go to a concert Tuesday noon, you ever go to those?

MJ: The noonday concerts?

GK: Yup. Every time I go I can count on seeing two men, always, always, always. If they weren't there I would call up and find out what was wrong with them. One of them was the janitor in the high school, and the other was the fellow who delivered Coca-Cola to the high school. Now if those two fellows, and one of them takes his wife all the time, can always go to those concerts and feel welcome, why can't some of you people? Well, maybe they could. So there are some who have "come to" that Bates is open to all these people. So I keep reminding them, tell them, "Come on, get up there to Bates. It's not a closed community."

MJ: Well thank you very much for your time to do the interview.

GK: Well I'm glad to see you, indeed.

End of Interview