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## Leavitt, Arnold oral history interview

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## **Interview with Arnold Leavitt by Andrea L'Hommedieu**

*Summary Sheet and Transcript*

### **Interviewee**

Leavitt, Arnold

### **Interviewer**

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

### **Date**

October 17, 2003

### **Place**

Lewiston, Maine

### **ID Number**

MOH 413

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### **Biographical Note**

Arnold L. Leavitt was born April 30, 1923 in Boston, Massachusetts. He moved with his family to Maine at age 10, when his father became owner of a lumber mill in Mechanic Falls. His father died in the mid 1940s, while Arnold was in the service. Leavitt graduated from Bates College in the class of 1943, and was a member of the debate team under Brooks Quimby. He became active in local and state Democratic politics, serving as Town Chair and later as County Chair for the nearly three decades. Around 1970, he worked on Governor Ken Curtis' staff as the Veterans Coordinator.

### **Scope and Content Note**

Interview includes discussions of: Lewiston-Auburn and state politics from the 1940s on; 1954 campaign and thoughts on Ed Muskie; Frank Coffin; Louis Jalbert; Ken Curtis; and Mechanic Falls, Maine.

### **Indexed Names**

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## **Transcript**

**Andrea L'Hommedieu:** This is an interview with Arnold Leavitt at the Muskie Archives on October 17th, 2003, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could you start by saying your full name and spelling it?

**Arnold Leavitt:** Arnold L. Leavitt, A-R-N-O-L-D, L-E-A-V-I-T-T.

**AL:** And where and when were you born?

**ALL:** I was born in Boston on April 30th, 1923.

**AL:** And is that the area in which you grew up?

**ALL:** Until I was twelve years old, and then I moved to Maine.

**AL:** So that was during the Depression years.

**ALL:** Yes, it was.

**AL:** Was the Depression years a factor for your moving?

**ALL:** Yes.

**AL:** Can you tell me about that?

**ALL:** Yes, my father was in the automobile business in Boston and the Depression made it very difficult for everyone. He owned a lot of real estate as well as having a business and couldn't pay the mortgages because people weren't paying their rent. And so he came to Maine at that time and we moved to Mechanic Falls, which was a relatively small town compared to Boston, and I went to high school there and graduated high school and then came to Bates.

**AL:** Oh, you're a Bates -?

**ALL:** Alumnus, yeah.

**AL:** Oh, okay. And what class at Bates?

**ALL:** Nineteen forty-three. I took the accelerated course in the summer so that I could finish up earlier, and I finished in March of '43.

**AL:** And what was Mechanic Falls like when you were in high school?

**ALL:** Well, it's a relatively small town. At that time there were about eighteen hundred people there, living there. And I was really out of my element because I was used to the big city and I had gone to Boston Latin School in the seventh grade which was a pretty good school in Boston. And when I came to Mechanic Falls they wanted to check to see which grade I should go into, because they didn't know whether I'd had the same subjects or not, and after checking with me and giving me tests they wanted to put me into the first year of high school. Actually, the second year of high school because I'd had all of the courses that they had offered in the first year of high school. But my dad was smarter than I was and he thought that it would be too much of a jump, so I did skip the eighth grade and went into the high school.

**AL:** And did you feel you were well prepared for that jump in -?

**ALL:** Yeah, I think so, I managed all right.

**AL:** And what did your dad do, now, when you came to Maine?

**ALL:** He opened up a lumber yard in Mechanic Falls and was quite successful with that.

**AL:** And what was Mechanic Falls like politically during that time?

**ALL:** Well, it was highly Republican. And when I got out of the service I went back to Mechanic Falls and took over the business because my father had died while I was in the service. And [I] got active in politics, became town chairman of the Democratic committee and then got active in the county committee, became chairman; I was chairman for about twenty-five or thirty years I guess.

**AL:** Wow, so this was, you started in the late forties, would you say?

**ALL:** Yes, when the Democratic Party was still in a very quiescent mood.

**AL:** Yes. Now what was it that gave you an interest in politics, do you remember when that happened?

**ALL:** Well, I had an interest in almost everything at that point. I liked the Democratic Party because it was the party of the common person rather than being for the wealthy, which is what

the Republican Party really stood for.

**AL:** But were your parents politically interested?

**ALL:** No, not really.

**AL:** And did you have any brothers or sisters?

**ALL:** No, I was an only child.

**AL:** So you were in Mechanic Falls, involved in Democratic politics in the late forties.

**ALL:** Yup.

**AL:** Ed Muskie was in the Maine legislature at that time. Were you aware of him that early, or was it later?

**ALL:** No, it was a little later. But I did get to meet him and know him. And, of course, Frank Coffin was becoming active at that time.

**AL:** And did you overlap, you overlapped slightly with Frank Coffin at Bates?

**ALL:** Yes, well he was at Bates at the same time that I was, but he was one or two classes ahead of me I guess.

**AL:** Yes, I believe he was the class of '40. So did you know him then?

**ALL:** Yes, yeah.

**AL:** What was your impression of Frank from those early days?

**ALL:** Well, he was quiet at that time and introspective, was brilliant even then. He was a debater and I got involved in debating, so we got to meet that way.

**AL:** Oh, neat. And you must have had Brooks Quimby?

**ALL:** Yes.

**AL:** Can you tell me, describe him to me, what was it about him that people gravitated to?

**ALL:** Well, he was sincerely interested in the people that were debating, and made you do a lot of research, asked questions and you had to give answers, and be knowledgeable, of course. It was quite an experience working with him.

**AL:** Was there anything that he taught you that really stuck with you over the years?

**ALL:** Oh, the ability to speak and to project yourself and your ideas.

**AL:** Do you recall that he ever used the term "art of persuasion?" Is that anything that sticks out in your mind?

**ALL:** I don't recall that, no.

**AL:** And did you get to see Frank Coffin debating while you were at Bates?

**ALL:** I can't honestly remember.

**AL:** Now, when Ed Muskie ran for governor in '54, did you work on that campaign?

**ALL:** On the periphery, yeah.

**AL:** In what way?

**ALL:** Well, during those days Androscoggin was the only Democratic county and so he spent a lot of time in Androscoggin County, campaigning, and I campaigned with him through all the towns in Androscoggin.

**AL:** And what was your impression of him?

**ALL:** Very bright, caring individual, very personable.

**AL:** Did you have a, having been on the debate team, had you heard about him in terms of his years at Bates when you were here?

**ALL:** Not really, no.

**AL:** And I, like you said, there weren't a lot of Democrats at that time, did you see or experience some people who were registered Republicans wanting to vote for Ed Muskie and why it was that they wanted to?

**ALL:** Well, Ed was the type who made friends very easily and he had a knack of asking the right questions of people and slapping them on the back, figuratively speaking, and getting around and really, sincerely being interested in the individual he was talking with.

**AL:** Do you have any recollections of anecdotes from that time period? I know, I'm asking fifty years ago.

**ALL:** Yes. Not really. One of the things that we did in Androscoggin county was we made several trips around the various towns with Ed and Frank, and Don Nicoll, who was along also. And I can remember him with the rest of us going into each of the beer parlors and circulating, and you didn't have to introduce him, he introduced himself and would go around shaking hands and talking with people. And people got to know him and like him because of his sincerity.

**AL:** So did he seem to enjoy the process of campaigning?

**ALL:** He really did, yeah. And people took to him, that was the, he wasn't aloof and, you know, up in the, yeah.

**AL:** So you were involved in politics in Mechanic Falls, and at the county level for years. Tell me your thoughts on Louis Jalbert, do you have recollections of Louis?

**ALL:** Oh yes.

**AL:** What sort, in what sort of ways did you deal with him over the years in your position?

**ALL:** Okay, at the outset, we were not friendly. Louis Jalbert considered himself the king of the Party and he kind of ruled with an iron hand. But we got, through the years, to be really close friends. And Louis started, Louis was opposed to the county committee because he couldn't control the county committee. So he started a candidates committee of office holders, and what little patronage came down through he wanted to control and the party would not allow that, which kind of ticked him off. But we got along fairly well, but in those days it was very common to, for me to select the next judge, when the governor sought an appointment they would ask the county committee for our recommendation. And in order to cater to Louis they would also ask the candidates committee but they would select our candidate, which of course didn't help matters any with our relationship. But as I say, we did get to be very good friends, were very close.

And a great many years Louis would ride to Augusta with me, because he didn't drive. And in those years I worked for the State, went to work for Ken Curtis on his staff as the veteran's coordinator. This was after the Vietnam War when veterans were coming back and were being mistreated and considered to be enemies actually, rather than heroes, and this was a bad situation. So Ken Curtis, who was governor at that time, appointed a blue ribbon committee to see what could be done to better things for the returning Vietnam era veterans and I was appointed co-chairman of that group. And we did work out, oh, somewhere around twenty-five different things that could be done, to be of assistance, and I spent a great deal of time on that. We finally filed a report and I remember bringing it in to Ken and he called me back the next day and said that he read it, thought it was excellent, but if it sat on the shelf without anybody pushing it nothing would happen and would I come work for him and implement the recommendations.

And at that time I was in business, in the lumber business, in the retail lumber business with a yard in Mechanic Falls and one in Lewiston and Auburn, on Center Street in Auburn, Turner Street. And business was not great, because Grossman's had come in with the cash and carry business and undercut the prices. And so I said, "Yes," I would. And I, so I spent a lot of time on that. We started a lot of different things which, many of which are still in effect. I can't remember them all, but I know that we started a job corps where I got various people to serve, once I said, you know, "I'm calling for the governor's office and we'd like you to serve on a committee," they immediately would accept, and we had bank presidents and heads of large

corporations and groups of that type throughout the state. And they did, it did have a positive effect on getting jobs.

We found that, I found actually, that there was a large chasm between the technical institutes and the University of Maine, even though, even in those days the technical institute did offer courses that the university offered like English and things of that type, they wouldn't accept them for credit. And so we were able, through the governor's office, to change that. And that led to finally the formation of these community colleges which is here today. We did a lot of things that were of benefit, and it was very gratifying. Ken was very good. He gave me pretty much of a free hand, so that helped.

**AL:** What was your impression of Ken Curtis as a governor?

**ALL:** I thought he was great, very good.

**AL:** Now, he was dealing with, in the legislature, at one point it was controlled by the Republicans, wasn't it?

**ALL:** Yes, it was.

**AL:** Do you have a feeling for how he was able to work with them?

**ALL:** Yeah, he was a very practical politician and was able to, to take advantage of the executive office and provided assistance with some of their stuff and it was reciprocal, you know, it worked. But the, Maine is I think a little unique in that the conception of the public as to the Republicans and the Democrats is of little difference once they get in the legislature. There's more of a bipartisan approach on a great many things. They still have their own, each party has its own major policies but a great many are intermingled.

**AL:** I have a question. You were talking about the, working to ensure the veterans, when they came back from Vietnam, being received safely and properly. That must have been quite a difficult time with your background, having been in WWII, as people coming back, you know, as heroes and then seeing these young, this next generation of young men coming back not being well received. I'm not sure exactly what I'm trying to ask, but a lot of, I would say, more the liberals were the anti-Vietnam protesters in a lot of cases. Is that true?

**ALL:** Well, I don't know as I would classify them as liberals. The public as a whole was very opposed to the Vietnam War and the media didn't help matters any, because it publicized the bad things about the war, and any war has a great many bad things about it. But their attitude towards the veteran, which was completely different and foreign from what it was in every other war, was bad. The Vietnam era veterans were actually spit upon if they showed up in uniform at any type of function or in a beer parlor or something of that type, they were looked upon with a great deal of distaste which was really bad. And times were not good financially at that time either, so it created a great many problems.

As I say, we were able to remedy quite a few. And I know that I got a great deal of help from



Republicans as well as Democrats at that time, in changing things for them. In fact, Harrison Richardson, who at that time was a state senator from Portland, was thinking of running for governor, was actually promoting himself to run for governor, and he was a veteran, and he was appointed by the legislature to work on a recognition of Vietnam Veterans Day, along with the governor and so forth. And I was able, through his office, to get the secretary of the Navy to come up and speak on that day. So we got a great deal of help from both parties, which answers one of your previous questions of how he, you know, how Ken was able to work with them.

**AL:** And it sounds like the Vietnam issue really wasn't a partisan issue.

**ALL:** No, it wasn't, it was public misconception really, media inspired.

**AL:** What are some of the issues that you faced locally in Mechanic Falls over the years that you've worked on?

**ALL:** Oh, golly.

**AL:** The particular ones that stand out?

**ALL:** Well, we were able to get some Democrats involved in politics in Mechanic Falls, which was a major accomplishment. I can remember running for the legislature from Mechanic Falls, Mechanic Falls, Minot and Poland, and all three were heavily Republican. And I was a young squirt, but we were able to mount quite a campaign and I lost by, I don't know, twelve or thirteen votes which was really a major accomplishment.

**AL:** And is Mechanic Falls still Republican today, or has it evened out?

**ALL:** I think it's evened out, yeah.

**AL:** I think we see that in Auburn, too.

**ALL:** Yes, Auburn has become Democratic actually. I moved to Auburn, oh boy, in the early fifties and became chairman of the city Democratic committee in Auburn and helped make that more Democratic than what it was.

**AL:** There's still a strong a Republican base in Auburn that I see.

**ALL:** Yes, there is.

**AL:** I live in Auburn as well. But what changes, and how did you see that change over the years?

**ALL:** Well, we had a lot of good people working in the party and it eventually changed. People in Maine fortunately are more interested in the candidate than they are in the party, and by getting good candidates and getting them out around, it helps. One thought that comes to mind, I can remember [Alonzo?] Lonny Conant who was a judge, I don't remember whether I

put him in as a judge or not, but it doesn't matter, but he was chairman of the city Republican committee when I was chairman of the, one of the years when I was chairman of the Democratic committee. And I used to take it upon myself to go to the Edward Little High School and explain the party platform, and that way we started Democratic interest in high school and it carried forward. And I can remember talking to Lonny and saying, "Why don't you come with me and give the Republican one at the same time that I give the Democratic one?" There's very little difference if you boil it down. And he did. And so we worked with the Republicans, but I think the Democrats were the first ones with starting a political committee at the high school level.

**AL:** And you found, did the high school kids get interested?

**ALL:** Yeah, they were very interested. We got them to go out and circulate pamphlets and literature and that type of thing, got them working. They enjoyed that.

**AL:** Now, did you know Tom Delahanty?

**ALL:** Yes I did, very well. Tom's father was a great friend of mine. And when Tom was going to Bowdoin he was writing a thesis on something or some type of paper, and at that time Tom called me at my lumberyard in Auburn and said, "I'd like to bring my son in and have you talk with him about the, what goes on in the Democratic party locally and particularly about the county committee." So he did, he brought him in and we chatted for about an hour, and he was a bright young guy even then.

**AL:** You're talking about Tom the son?

**ALL:** Yeah, and the father, too.

**AL:** Now, the father was involved in running for, was it Congress the year that Muskie ran for governor?

**ALL:** Yeah, he ran for Congress. I don't know whether it was the same year or not.

**AL:** Who were some others in this community area that you remember, do you remember Ernest Malenfant?

**ALL:** Oh yeah.

**AL:** Tell me what you remember about him. I understand he was quite a character.

**ALL:** He really was a character. He spoke French with an English accent and English with a French accent. He, I know that some other people told me that he would go around house to house to campaign and he'd walk up and knock on the door and introduce himself and say, "See, look out the window, there's no automobile that's mine. I don't have an automobile. I'm walking house to house." And at that time he was a flag man or something on the railroad. "Yeah," he said, "me honest, me don't have a car."

**AL:** Do you recall how his job performance was as mayor?

**ALL:** No, I don't really recall. Mayor was more of a figurative position than, very little that they actually controlled or did. They, I guess they appointed committees and they did that on pretty much like a patronage type of basis where, if you work for me in my campaign I'll put you on the committee, you know, whatever you want. But it's been fascinating and very interesting.

**AL:** I imagine this community would have been quite exciting to be involved in over all these years.

**ALL:** Yeah, it certainly is.

**AL:** Are there particular issues from the community over the years that people have gotten really interested, shown an interest in, or controversial that you think has sort of shaped the communities?

**ALL:** Well, people in Lewiston and Auburn are excellent examples of the work ethic, they really provide a day's work for a day's pay, and this has stood us in very good stead. One of the things I did while I was in business in Auburn, we experienced in those years a loss of the textile industry and a loss of the shoe industry, and that was pretty much our bread and butter, and it was very difficult for shoe workers and mill workers to find other jobs. They didn't have the job training available, you know, that the government now has put in, so it was quite a drastic situation.

And I got involved on a voluntary basis with [Woodbury] Woody Brackett, who at that time was city manager of Auburn. And we formed the Auburn business development committee and got a few people with us, to work with us, and went out and tried to do what we could to stir up some new industry. And I can remember we were able to get several good industrial facilities in, [??] J.D. Bits and, oh, there was a biscuit company that came to Auburn; General Electric.

I can remember, particularly with the plastics company that they were at that time located in, Pioneer Plastics, located in a plant in Sanford and they were having labor problems as well as not very good community relations down there. And the owners came up, we had plenty of land and plenty of workers, and the owners came up and at that time I told them that they would get, they would have no problems with workers up here, that they really got a good day's work for a day's pay. And at that time the, I can't remember the company name, but there was a plant making parts for computers in Lewiston at the, where Liberty Mutual is now, and they had already announced that they were going out of business. I think it was three or four months from the time that we sent them over there. I said, "I can take you over or you can go yourself." And they said, "No," they would prefer going themselves. So I called them and set it up and the two owners went over there.

And they came back afterwards and told me, said, "We went in and it was just before a shift change. We walked around and there were a lot of women and they were sitting at long benches and working under magnifying glasses and microscopes and, you know, putting Germanian

crystals or whatever it was together, and there was music playing, everybody was happy.” And they noticed that when they walked around the workers didn't stop working and look up to see who was there, they kept right on working. And they said the people waiting for the shift change were out back in the hallways and aisles and they were dancing and humming to the music and no one seemed upset with the fact that in three months they were going to be out of business. And that pretty much sold them on the worker attitude in this area. So, that's unique in, I think in all of Maine, but particularly in Lewiston and Auburn where people are used to going to work every day and working.

**AL:** Yeah, the story of the mill workers that really tell of hard, hard working class and work ethics.

**ALL:** Yes, very good. It's something that we can be proud of, yes.

**AL:** Are there others that I haven't mentioned from this area that you think played a major role?

**ALL:** Well, Frank Coffin played a major role in helping to revitalize the Democratic Party. And Frank, I can remember when he was running for office and tried to emulate Ed Muskie going around, and I took him around. And Frank had one real problem: he couldn't talk to the average person in average language. I mean, he had to use big words, and it was a little bit insulting to some of the people. And I tried to tell him and but he says, “Arnold, I'm trying,” but he says, “I can't, it's difficult.” But he did get elected to Congress. But, Frank was really a very, very bright guy and a good planner, did a great job. And really, along with Ed, were able to revitalize the Democratic Party. Don Nicoll at that time was chief assistant for Ed I guess, when he did serve, and Don did quite a job, too.

**AL:** Yeah, I know that, Don tells the story about sort of bugging Frank to run for months and months and Frank finally agreeing to do so, and he said now that you've gotten me into this you have to come work for me. So, actually that was in terms of the state committee and not the Congress, Congress came a while after that. But do you recall their office they had down on Lisbon Street in Benoit's store?

**ALL:** Oh yes, yeah. I was there many times. I don't know, there's a lot of local people who did wind up in Augusta serving in one capacity or another, a lot of very good people.

**AL:** Do you remember, in the sixties, the Model Cities program that Lewiston had?

**ALL:** Yup.

**AL:** How do you think that went, did you see positive changes that have lasted?

**ALL:** Not really. That and urban development I think were two duds, frankly. Both of them didn't impress me too much. Auburn tried real hard and was singled out for, you know, being a unique city or something. I don't know, that, it didn't impress me too much. I think both cities are doing very well right now, heading in the right direction.

**AL:** Do you see Lewiston downtown being revitalized successfully?

**ALL:** I hope so, I don't know. It's tough. The trend has been towards establishment of malls, as you know, and keeping people away from the downtown areas. Now throughout the country they're trying to revitalize the downtowns, which they should have done years ago. I can remember, oh, back in the fifties, dealing with Jim Pelletier who was a local realtor, Roland was his name, actually his name was James but everybody called him Roland that knew him well, went to work for the State in the Department of Economic Development which promotes development. And he had the concept of covering the first two blocks of Lisbon Street with plastic, leveling the sidewalks off so there wouldn't be a sidewalk there, so people could walk from one, on the same level, putting kiosks in the middle and having the storekeepers open their doors so the heat would come out, and people could travel from one side to the other easily. At that time we still had stores down there. And he got, pursued it further and said that he would have the banks make very low term, low cost loans so that people could redecorate the fronts of their stores to make them more attractive. And it was, I think it was a great idea but it fell flat on its face, it didn't work.

But that would have made something quite different and attractive and would have stopped the decline and the deterioration of Lisbon Street. Now it's pretty much the court and the attorneys, very few stores. So it's going to be difficult, but I think it could be done. You know, you need the odd type of store development rather than major stores.

**AL:** Is there anything, oh, I was going to ask . . . Over the years when Ed Muskie went on to the Senate and his national political career, did he still come back to this area and did you have contact with him?

**ALL:** Oh sure, yeah. Not as much, but he still came back, yeah.

**AL:** Did you feel like you still knew who Ed Muskie was?

**ALL:** Oh yeah, absolutely, yup, Ed was Ed. And I have been very active in many other things besides politics, I was active in veterans functions and been active in AARP and, oh, many other things. But I can remember when Ed was running for president and the VFW had our Washington conference which we had every spring. And we usually had, not usually, always invite our members of Congress to come attend the banquet which we hold. And Ed came to the banquet and before the banquet we, every state has an area with a state sign and there are open bars there and so forth, and so we had eight or ten of us from the veterans organization that were there and we kept them all running to the bar because there were long lines, to get drinks for Ed. And he knew what I was doing, but he had a hollow leg, he could drink for hours and hours and hours with no effect. But everybody came around from all the other states to shake hands with him and he was having a great time. But that stands out in my mind as I remember him.

**AL:** Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you feel is important to add to your history?

**ALL:** No, I just was rambling, as you know.

**AL:** Oh, it's wonderful. I just don't want to miss anything, if I haven't asked the right questions.

**ALL:** No, I can't think of anything, you've done very well.

**AL:** Well, thank you very much.

*End of Interview*