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Interview with Emilien Levesque by Stuart O'Brien

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Levesque, Emilien

Interviewer

O'Brien, Stuart

Date

November 6, 1998

Place

Farmingdale, Maine

ID Number

MOH 056

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Biographical Note

Emilien Levesque was born in Grand Isle, Maine, in 1922. He grew up in Van Buren, graduating from the Van Buren Boy's High School. His mother was a dressmaker, and his father was stricken with tuberculosis when Emilien was eleven. His mother was left to care for her seven children, Emilien the second oldest. He went to school in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1941 to learn the tool and die trade. In 1943, he enlisted in the Army. He was active in Europe. He began in North Africa, and then moved his way through Italy, finally fighting in Northern France. In France, he was shot three times, and subsequently taken prisoner by the Germans. He returned home in 1945. He began working for Frazier Papers when he returned to the St. John Valley. He became actively involved in the Madawaska paper union, Local 365. When Ed Muskie ran for governor in 1954, Levesque became an active Democrat, helping to deliver the Saint John Valley of Maine to Ed Muskie on election day.

In 1960, Levesque began his political career by running for Maine State Legislature. He served for five terms from 1960 to 1970. In the Legislature, he was floor leader for the Democrats. He became an authority within the Maine Democratic Party, and became a mentor to John Martin, who assumed Levesque's seat in 1970.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussion of: Van Buren, Maine; the US Army in Europe during World War II, including beach Landings, heavy machine guns, Levesque's capture by the Germans, and German war hospitals and the care for Allied fighters; Frazier Paper Mill; becoming the Union President of Local 365; organizing voters in the St. John Valley for Ed Muskie in 1954; becoming Democratic Chair of Madawaska; Muskie's interaction with the Valley; Don Nicoll; the rise of Democrats in Maine; Levesque's involvement with the Maine State Legislature; Levesque as a legislator; Loring Air Force Base; Floyd Harding; Elmer Violette; John Martin; and Muskie as a leader.

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Transcript

Emilien Levesque: My name is Emilien, E-M-I-L-I-E-N, last name Levesque, L-E-V-E-S-Q-U-E. And I live at [Redacted].

Tuck O'Brien: All right. Where and when were you born?

EL: I was born in Grand Isle, Maine in 1922.

TO: Did you grow up there?

EL: And grew up there. From that point on I went to school in the Van Buren Boys' High School, and from there I went to Hartford, Connecticut. And of course that was during the start of WWII, so I worked there as a tool and die maker and had gone to the school for that purpose, taking tool and die making, and also a machinist in and around Hartford, Connecticut. Of course that was a busy, busy time for the war production. And from that point on, after a year and a half in working in Hartford, Connecticut, I was drafted and going into the service. And in the service they took me to Macon, Georgia and I was trained and there for sixteen weeks. And from there,

that point on, they took me to Wilmington, Delaware and from there to Casablanca, North Africa.

TO: Now, growing up, what were your parents' occupations?

EL: My parents' occupations -- my mother was a full-time dressmaker and my dad took sick when I was only eleven years old, for tuberculosis, and he went to a hospital in Presque Isle, Maine from Van Buren, Maine. And that was the beginning of my childhood days taking care . . . By then my mother was left with seven kids; I was the first oldest boy and the second in the family. And so my job was more or less to help my mother bring up the rest of the family. And from that point on the rest of the family pretty well separated. From 1940 on to 1945, during the wartime they all went in different directions, so that still left me as the oldest, or the second oldest in the family. A sister, an older sister more or less helped Mother to take care of the rest of us.

TO: What was the economy like in the area you grew up and moved on to?

EL: Basically there was a paper mill in the town that took care of a lot of the working population in the area. And in the off year, some of those people worked in the woods cutting logs for the mill, for the paper mill and the saw mill that they had in the town. That occupied probably six or seven hundred population on a full-time basis.

TO: How did you end up in Hartford, Connecticut?

EL: That's where I took my training as a tool and die maker. That was the closest, I was, my two sisters were down there and my brother wanted, was a year and a half younger than I was, and he wanted to come down there after high school. So that's where I took my tool and die making experience and schooling, in Hartford and East Hartford, Connecticut, which pretty well started my game in having to work for a living in Connecticut. In and around home I was too young to work in the saw mill or the paper mill, and so that's how it all started.

TO: So you got stationed in North Africa.

EL: Casablanca.

TO: In the Army?

EL: In the Army infantry, I was in.

TO: How long were you in the Army?

EL: I was in the Army from 1941, April 1941, until December 5, 1945.

TO: Did you see most of your action in North Africa or . . . ?

EL: No, the landing in Casablanca was only a stopover to the . . . Military operations at that

time was in, had gone beyond North Africa and was going to Sicily, and from there to Italy, and then from Italy to Germany, was my path. The landing in Casablanca was only a stopover to replenish my supply on my way to a landing, a beachhead landing in Sicily, in Palermo, Sicily. And from Palermo, Sicily for just three and a half months, I went to Salerno, Italy. And that was another beachhead landing by the 45th Infantry Division in conjunction with the 3rd Division, both infantry divisions. And a part of the 36th Division landed in Salerno, Italy.

Our mission then was to go towards the central part of Italy and capture all the high grounds on our way to Mt. Abbey. Mt. Abbey was a famous cathedral that was occupied by the monks and had been there for at least two hundred years. And it was known for its, basically a religious organization that was full-time occupied by the monks in the area. And during the war, of course, the Germans first were there and they had taken the high point. In those areas it was Mt. Abbey and the church that was associated with it. So at that point the Germans declared Mt. Abbey a free zone. In other words, they were not fighting from Mt. Abbey, from the area. They were just there as an observation post. So we did not fire any artillery or anything on Mt. Abbey because it had been declared an open city, or an open place where there was no, there was no supposedly war intended in that area.

And from that point our outfit, the 45th Division landed in Angio, Italy after a short period of time. But Angio, the landing in Angio was in February of '43, February '44, oh yes, right, yeah because I was in, in '43 from April '43 to December '43 in Italy. The Angio beachhead was in February '44. I'll get my years together after a while.

Mrs. Levesque: Another thing that you said, I don't know if you have to correct that but you said you were in the service in 1941? You went in the service in the fall of 1943.

EL: Oh yes, I went to Connecticut in '41. Corrections all over the place here.

Mrs. L: Well just that one. You're doing good.

TO: Okay, so the landing in Angio.

EL: Angio, yes. That was the third beachhead landing that our outfit had done after landing in Africa. And from that point on Angio was the longest period of time that we stayed in any given area because it was fast-moving war from Africa on the way to Germany through whatever ways and means there was. So that was the hardest landing that we did as an infantry regiment and division to make sure that the troops all coordinated their efforts through General Clark, Mark Clark, who was the commanding general for American troops in that part of the ocean, that part of the country. So from that point on I don't know what else I could (*unintelligible word*).

After we liberated Rome on June 4th of '44, June 6th was the beachhead landing at Cherbourg in northern France. And our landing from the south on the Mediterranean to southern France took part sometime at the end of August of '44. And that was the purpose of the landing in southern France was to coordinate our efforts of taking southern France and meeting the other troops from Cherbourg in northern France somewhere around Grenoble. But we were not able to meet somewhere around Grenoble because of the terrain and the fighting and whatever happens

during war time. So our outfit continued from Grenoble through the Vosges Mountains in eastern France close to the Alps in Austria. And from that point on our outfit was assigned to take the Maginot Line in France, and we did that. And from the Maginot Line our regiment, the 157th Infantry of the 45th Division, were assigned to take the Siegfried Line getting into the western part of Germany.

At that point our battalion was assigned to take the high grounds between the Maginot Line and the Siegfried Line. And at that point of course the German forces were still very, very strong because they were consolidating their troops from all around the Mediterranean. And between the Mediterranean and the German, and the Russians, they had mighty German force between . . . Of course the Siegfried Line was their prize that they had built to defend Germany. Nobody could take any point beyond the Siegfried Line going into Germany, that was the intent. But it was short-lived because they had to split their forces in Germany between the Russians and the Americans, the English, the French and everybody else that was involved in those forces. The advent of taking the high grounds and getting through the Siegfried Line was where we were surrounded. The 3rd Battalion of the 157th Regiment was encircled and the advent of that we could not fight our way through the Siegfried Line because they had put all their forces to make sure that we were not going to go beyond that to take the Siegfried Line and then to cross the Rhine River. So that's where on the third day of being surrounded, I was then in charge of our machine gun platoon for the 3rd Battalion . . .

TO: Heavy machine gun?

EL: Heavy machine gun, and I was the sergeant for the platoon to take care of four gun positions. And during that time of course we were surrounded and trying to defend ourselves. We lost a lot of troops in the 3rd Battalion because once you open your machine gun in defense or offense, it's only a matter of seconds, five, ten, fifteen seconds before the enemy knows where you are. And your life expectancy at that point, if you see them first you live, and if they see you first you don't. And that's the price of war that you have to pay.

And after being shot three times on the third day of being surrounded . . . I was shot and was in the hole for three days before I was captured by two Germans that were taking care of the area. And they were taking care of the wounded as well as defending themselves. So the German, one was a German officer or non-com who told his other buddies to go get a stretcher. And of course I was not the only one that had been wounded there, or the only one that was shot. So they brought a stretcher there and carried me out of the hole that I was in and brought me to, they had, close, very close to the front lines, they had horse carts. They didn't have any vehicles to go up to those high points, so they had horse carts. And that's what they brought me to, a horse cart, and carried me out to their observation post, oh, maybe three or four miles out there because it took hours in the horse cart through the woods to . . . There were three others who were in the same horse cart by the time they put it all together. So at that point, they took us off the horse cart. And they had an old German truck there that they put us on and carried us to Bitche, B-I-T-C-H-E, which was a small community on the way to the Rhine. So they took care of patching us up with tape and wire and whatever else they had to take us to a regular hospital across the Rhine.

And at that point we went to Mannheim, a big hospital which by then, it must have been from three or four o'clock in the afternoon when we were, when we surrendered. It was about 9:30 at night by the time we got to Mannheim. And there they put us in a hospital and they treated us, those that were wounded, they treated us the same as they did with other German soldiers that were wounded and were in the same hospital. So we were not, we were only separated by the fact that we were Americans and the others that were wounded were German. And they just had separate beds and rooms for us, but they took care of us as best as they could with what they had. By then they had been fighting the war for almost five years, in 1938-'39 is when they were started. So that was one of the mysteries of how wars are fought in those days. And they patched us up and they said, "We'll keep you here in the hospital for a while until we had time and material to transport you to another facility." Because Mannheim was close to the defense line of the Germans and the Americans, the British, the French and everybody else that was there. And we were told that as soon as they have the capacity to move us out of Mannheim, because the hospital was always full and was very busy, they would give us another place to go.

So we were, at least the group that I was with, we were in this Mannheim hospital for at least a week, a week and a half. And then they notified us that at, one night some of us would be taken out of the hospital and brought to a railroad station. And at the railroad station . . . And any traffic on any of the open road or railroad during the daytime was not very likely because of all the American airplanes and British and French airplanes, that was taking over the surviving troops that were there and defending the road and railroad at all costs, because that's the only thing they had. So that night they came and took us from the hospital to the railroad station and from there some of us were taken to a recovery hospital in Eppenheim in Germany.

And that Eppenheim hospital that we were in was a, formerly an institution taking care of retarded or mentally ill people. And they had changed it to make it a recovery hospital for all prisoners of war that was taken in those areas of Germany. And that hospital was managed by French forces that had been captured in 1941. There was a commandant, a German commandant, an assistant and three other guards that were there at Eppenheim. Now in that hospital that we were in, I'll call it a hospital because that's where we were supposed to be recovering, there was, at the time that I was there, at least seventeen hundred different prisoners of war in that facility, in that hospital, being managed by French troops and doctors. And those troops that were there at the time were from twelve different countries, from Morocco, North Africa, Italy, Sicily, Greece, Turkey, English, French, Norwegians, Swedish. That comprised the people that had been captured. And most of them if not all of them were, all had been seriously wounded and needed recovery care for some time, for as long as they were there, until they were liberated in March 27, 1944.

Mrs. L: That's when you got out of the prison camp?

EL: Out of the prison camp, yeah. And from, because of the distance that they had to take us, on March 27 we were brought to . . .

TO: Is this 1944 or 1945?

EL: Forty-four, they took . . .

Mrs. L: When you came out of there?

EL: Yes, out of the hospital.

Mrs. L: It had to be '45, dear.

EL: No, I was separated in '45.

Mrs. L: Yeah, I know, but you came back, when you came back on a plane you went to Paris, when the place was liberated. You went to Paris and you were there, what, a month? I don't know. It doesn't matter. And from there when you came on the plane, you landed in Delaware.

EL: Yes, Wilmington, Delaware.

Mrs. L: Yeah, and from there . . .

EL: Went to Devons.

Mrs. L: Okay, so you were in Devons for a few months because you were only discharged in December. But when you left that hospital, when you were freed from the hospital as a prisoner of war, it was '45. You were there about three months.

EL: So it had to be March 27, '45, and they took us by plane from a field outside of Eppenheim . . .

TO: The Germans or the . . . ?

EL: No, the Americans. By then we had been liberated, on the 27th of March, and they took us to places where they had available landing strips or fields that they had small planes that they could put us in, in stretchers. And the different troops that they took from the Eppenheim hospital went to different places in France and parts of Germany on the west side of the Rhine River, depending on what their wounds were, whether it was burnt or shots or fractures or whatever. In my case they took us to a landing strip there where they had German airplanes during that period of time. And from that point, from that landing strip, they took me and several others that I don't know who they were or name or anything, they took us from there and we landed, a number of us, in Paris, France. And we went to a, they took us to a French hospital there, and the name of the hospital was L'Abbee Voisier right outside of Paris, France. And that's where I stayed for thirty days for the simple reason that they didn't want to bring me or any of the others because when I was captured I weighed about a hundred and seventy-five pounds, a hundred and seventy, seventy-five pounds. And when I was liberated, at the time that they brought me to Paris, I weighed only a hundred and twenty-six pounds in the short period of time.

TO: The Germans didn't feed you or . . . ?

EL: Well, they feed us what they had.

TO: They didn't have too much.

EL: And they hardly had anything by then. They had been at war for a long time and we got relatively the same things that the German had as far as population wise. But we didn't have to do anything, we were just there recovering from our wounds. And in the morning we had a bowl of soup, in the morning, and we called that potato peeling soup for what purposes. And in the afternoon we had a slice of brown bread, and that was it. And that was to take care of us, because we didn't have to do any work, we didn't have to go anywhere. Luckily I was speaking both languages and they had a French chaplain there at Eppenheim and he had access to the entire hospital for anybody that needed counsel with a religious group. That was his job. So he was able to take me to go see any of the other American or English troops that were in that hospital.

Mrs. L: To translate.

EL: Yeah, to translate for the reverend to any of those troops that I could understand English and French, so that was my purpose for being there. So that's the story from that point on. They kept me in Paris for at least thirty some-odd days to fatten me up so that I would be reasonably presentable to, coming back to this country.

TO: Now, were you already married when you were coming back?

Mrs. L: No, we were married after the war.

TO: Did you know each other?

Mrs. L: We were married in '46. Oh, yeah, I knew him before. I knew him from, I'm from up there, too. I'm from Van Buren originally, and, which is in Aroostook County. And I was a very good friend of one of his sisters, we went to school together and we became very good friends, and I'd go sleep at his house. But she introduced me to him, but I had no idea that we'd ever go out. And then he, well, he was in Connecticut and he got drafted from there but he didn't come home for twenty-four hours before he was shipped out. He knew he was being shipped out. And I asked my boss for the day off, you know. And we were together all those twenty-four hours because he didn't know when he'd be back, if he'd be back. You know, this is infantry, so, it was a very bad time of the war. He went to, you know, and I'm still finding out things that I haven't heard before, believe it or not because he wouldn't talk about it for a long time. And these anniversaries that they have about fifty years and all that, well, that's reminded him of a lot of things you know. Sometimes he gets teary and, you know, . . .

TO: Did you ever go see that movie?

EL: Which one was that?

TO: The Saving Private Ryan movie?

Mrs. L: No, we haven't seen that. I've heard a lot of it, but we haven't seen it. He's not a movie guy. I am. Probably going to have it on TV, I have to wait until it comes. No, you have to tell him about, jeez, I don't know, he did a long thing, a long session on the war there, but like I said he doesn't talk about it very often, so.

TO: No, that was good. But now let's, so you came back to Wilmington, and you came back to Maine, I assume?

EL: Yes.

TO: Afterwards. And then? Did you get married right away?

Mrs. L: We got married in 1947.

TO: Forty-seven. What did you do for work when you moved back up to the county?

EL: I went to the pa-, worked with the paper mill in Madawaska.

TO: Madawaska.

Mrs. L: Before that when you came back you went to potatoes then.

EL: I went to potato and I worked . . .

Mrs. L: The first year we were married, we were married in August. And that first fall you went back to work in potato houses.

TO: So potatoes and paper were the two big things? That's what everyone did?

EL: Yeah, in the St. John Valley.

TO: At this time it was very French up there.

EL: Yes, ninety-six percent French, and . . .

Mrs. L: But it's bilingual.

TO: Bilingual.

Mrs. L: Oh yes, very much so.

TO: So how did you get involved with the Madawaska Union?

EL: I was president of the local union.

TO: How did you get involved with that?

EL: Because nobody else wanted to take it.

Mrs. L: And there was a big need.

EL: And it was, the unionized paper mill in Madawaska, it started unionizing in 1938, '39, which was just the start of the war. And they had relatively no organization other than the fact that they were allowed to pay dues and belong to a union of one kind or another. And at the paper mill in Madawaska at the time that I got there, there was three different unions there. The one that I was with was the pulp and sulfite and paper mill workers and the others was the paper makers only, and the third one was administrative part of Frazier Paper Ltd. And so, in those days it wasn't very easy to belong to a union and be an officer to defend the rest of the members in case that they had problems or had gotten into some problems or not.

TO: Why?

EL: Because of the fact union was so new to all of them. They knew, they heard about other unions that were, that had been in fact organized for a long time. But for Maine, the number of unions that were in place at that time of the year was very, very small. And especially the paper industry, the pulp and paper industry at the time had just started being organized, so they had no savvy as to what they had to do or what they could do and what they could not do. So it was a matter of learning or having somebody that wanted to learn how organized unions work, and how they work with the company, with management. And that was one tough job to do -- learning to coordinate the efforts of the working force with management, because they were not organized any better than we were. And they were of course fighting the unions because they had to give some kind of consent to do things or allow things to be done that they never had done before. But with the organization of the union, they had to sit down with the unions and negotiate.

TO: What were conditions like? What were the major issues for the unions?

EL: The major conditions for the union was principally wage scales that would correspond with other pulp and paper mills in the state of Maine or in New England, or nationwide, for that matter. The wage scale was one of the major things that management was fighting because it was part of their work to set up wage scales for fifty years. And the rest of it was negotiating with the company management on holidays, a day off or sick leave, insurance, life insurance and disability insurance, which also was part of workers' compensation. If you got injured in the mill, they were to be taken care of medically as well as financially. So the part of the labor union at those stages was very, very limited compared to what they call having an organized management in this day and age, because it was so new to everybody.

So the education in working as president of the Local 365 in Madawaska was quite an education for me as well as the work force. And of course, the management as far as I was concerned, there was a matter of negotiating as an equal to them. And the better arguments I could make for a point for them to agree on, it was part of my job and the negotiating committee to sell the ideas

to management of what we needed and what we wanted in order to compare our work force with the rest of the paper mills in the country, or the state for that matter.

TO: Now, how did you get involved with the Democratic Party?

EL: Oh, jeez. You know, I had belonged to the local union then for a year or so or more. So Madawaska, Madawaska and principally the entire state of Maine, and more locally Aroostook County and Madawaska, they were primarily Republican; had been Republican for years and years and years. My mother and father were Republicans and so was everybody else Republican because that's the way it was. And so the, the election of '53, '54 . . . Madawaska in the first place had never had a Democratic local chairman, so they needed to have a chairman principally to support the new venture of the rest of the state of Maine in going Democrat in a lot of areas. And that's where Ed Muskie got into the picture. Forty-three, '44, or more than that, the election was what?

TO: Fifty-four.

EL: Fifty-four. They were getting ready in the state of Maine for an election in '54. So they had to have the chairmans of local communities so that they could work with the rest of the state and the county to organize the election of Ed Muskie, which was . . . Who knew Ed Muskie in 1954 when he was running for election for governor of the state of Maine? That was relatively unknown, and to compound that completely, for a Democrat to run for election in the state of Maine, which the state of Maine by then had been Republican for at least fifty years, all parties. It was one of those things that Ed Muskie had the, had the knowledge and had the capability of his education of being able to get along with all the communities, all the organizations in the state to organize his running for election. And for his running for election to even find in different parts of the state, to find somebody with Polish orientation to run for governor of the state of Maine that had been Republican for fifty years. And to run as a Democrat, was a trial and tribulation of those years that started the state of Maine of changing from completely Republican for so long, to running for public office as a Democrat, was a relatively unknown thing in those years. It was unknown for the simple purpose that who was going to organize a bunch of Democrats to vote for a member of the House or the Senate or the governorship or the federal organization was relatively unknown because it was so new to everybody to have a Democrat run for office at that time of the year.

And that's how Ed Muskie more or less totally organized the state of Maine Democratic Party as an organization, as a working organization. And I was town chairman of the Democrats for I don't know how many years. I was town chairman which they never had a Democrat chairman committee in Madawaska from day one, and I was local chairman of the Democrats in Madawaska until 1960 from that point on.

Mrs. L: Muskie was the first Democrat that was running for governor that ever came to Madawaska to meet the people. And they came out in the numbers. I was a member of the American Legion Auxiliary and we put on a tea for him one afternoon, and it was fantastic. The girls made sandwiches and some baked sweets and there was a lot of people there. And it was, I was very impressed by him. Everybody loved Ed Muskie.

TO: When was the first time you met Ed Muskie? Was it at this time he came up to Madawaska?

Mrs. L: That's the first time I met him.

EL: Oh, I met him before that because, you know, it was just a new organization. Democrats in Aroostook County, and especially the St. John Valley, was a totally new organization completely. And of course the Republicans had a lot of power for so many years that they didn't think that it was possible for the Democrats, especially in the St. John Valley where Franco-Americans were, they were ninety-six percent.

Mrs. L: I wasn't aware that you met him before that.

EL: Yes I did, I met him the first time in Van Buren . . .

End of Side One
Side Two

TO: When did you meet him in Van Buren?

EL: I met him in Van Buren in the spring of the year after I was Democratic chairman. Elmer Violette was running for a Senate seat in the St. John Valley, for Aroostook County for that matter, and that was the first time that I met Ed Muskie in Van Buren, which was twenty-five miles from where I was working. Ed Muskie had put an organization together to meet in the St. John Valley because it was so strong Franco-American. And the Democrats were so brand new in the area that he needed to have some organizational plan to put . . . *(brief interruption by Mrs. L.)*

So the organization was so young and so totally inexperienced in having a political organization in the St. John Valley. The lower part of the county, starting in Houlton, Presque Isle, Caribou and those places, were still remaining Republicans and they were not about to let Democrats anywheres in the county, much less in the St. John Valley. Because Franco-Americans, when I started with the Democrats in Madawaska, it was something that was not appreciated by too many people. Because we were so young and so untrained in the political science, that it left the committees to work with on an iffy side if the rest of the family for fifty years had all been Republican and a member of the family at my age then, a young age of the twenties, to be a Democrat. Trying to work in the St. John Valley was unheard of for so long that Ed Muskie had been able to put this group of people, elected as committee chairman or town chairman or county chairman, as a focal point of getting together.

And my meeting with Ed Muskie then was when Elmer Violette was the town chairman of the Van Buren Democrats, and I was town chairman of the Democrats in Madawaska, is when Ed Muskie made it known that he was coming to Van Buren. And we were told those that could travel, to travel to Van Buren and have a meeting there with Ed Muskie and the local, any committee members or any announcements to have the general public, uh . . . And of course this

was so brand-new that everybody that came there were absolutely surprised of the organization of having Democrats in the St. John Valley. It was, and we attributed the organization or the wanting of an organization to Ed Muskie who was coming for the first time, somebody running for governor in the state of Maine, to come to the St. John Valley. (*Brief interruption by Mrs. L.*) So the Ed Muskie group started when he was running for governor as a Democrat, which hadn't happened for so many years, that surprised everybody. And plus the fact that being in a Franco-American community of ninety-five, ninety-six percent, and to have somebody Polish was relatively unknown in this part of the country for a long time. So that was my first meeting with Ed Muskie.

And of course his knowledge through his schooling and his organization down the state of Maine was something that surprised us all because we never had anybody with that kind of talents come into the St. John Valley and running for politics. So Ed Muskie was very well-received from that day on as far as I was concerned, and the committee that I worked with, to have an organization, a Democratic organization, and headed for Ed Muskie who was the first one to come to any organizational meeting in the St. John Valley. So that was a surprise to all of us. The talent and the ability of explaining to us people that had no experience in the political arena, through his knowledge and education of how this, all this had to function if we were the leaders of the community.

TO: So you started to campaign for Ed. And how did he do in the St. John Valley in the election, in the first election of '54? Did he get a lot of votes?

EL: The first election, if I remember correctly, the first election with Ed Muskie running for governor, the number of votes for the Democrats in that election was something like eight to one Democratic. For a new organization, that was an eminent surprise to everybody. The only fact was that we were able because we were so new and so innocent of how the system worked that everybody had to go vote. And everybody had to go vote Democrat because this was a new organization, and it worked. And a new guy was running for election and came to the St. John Valley. To have us vote for a governor that would represent them, as far as the state of Maine was concerned, was a new venture, totally, like somebody going into grade school and starting at grade one. The population there has never heard for somebody running for high public office other than Republican. The Republicans, they had the show for years and years. This time Ed Muskie, we were hell-bound, some of us, isn't that right, Mother? That we were going to have Democrats and we were going to run for election and change, at least the, change the face of the St. John Valley as far as the political arena was concerned.

Mrs. L: He also covered the whole St. John Valley. They're all small towns, but he came several times. Jane came with him two times, and he won them over. That's the only way I can put it. He was marvelous.

TO: So he won.

Mrs. L: Oh, yes.

TO: And he, the new administration, Don was telling me, Don Nicoll was telling me about a

meeting that you had in 1955 with Ben Dorsky at which Don Nicoll came. Do you remember that?

EL: Yes.

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

EL: Well, because Ben Dorsky was the head honcho of labor unions. And I was, as a Democrat also a chairman of the labor union in Madawaska as far as the Local 365 was concerned. And of course my trying to sell Democrats to Ben Dorsky was not something that was a necessity, as far as I was concerned. I was running my show and he runs his show from his point of view. Although everybody that I knew or talked to in the labor movement, labor and management organization in the state of Maine, knew that Ben Dorsky was a Republican, always had been a Republican because that's what the state was for. And for a labor leader in the state of Maine, in my organization, in my way of looking things, the state of Maine can have a labor union as a Republican was relatively unheard of and totally unnecessary. Because the Republicans had one avenue of supporting management, almost all the ones that I had involvement with. So anybody that was anybody in the political organization that was Republican was totally undeserving of a vote for election. That's the way it started. The Democrats had started in the St. John Valley and Aroostook County on that principle, that if you're a Republican, look at who your leaders are. And of course then that was the political arena, a Republican going to Congress. They were all Republicans in Washington, as well as the state of Maine, here, from the governor down. So this was one of the things that separated the Democrats from those elected in office for so many years.

And that I think was a very strong point of what Ed Muskie was trying to tell us and did such a beautiful job of telling us how to organize, how to do things with the people that we were dealing with. And that part of the organization worked really well because Ed Muskie and Jane, his wife, would come with him every now and then, covered one end of the St. John Valley to the other. And from that point on went to the rest of Aroostook County. And we had good organization in the rest of the county as well which, from a totally Republican organization in the county. And all of a sudden somebody comes by and says, "Well, you know, now we've got Democrats in the county." And especially in the valley because the valley had been so Republican for so many years that it was unheard of for anybody to be so unknowledgeable as to run for or be elected as a Democrat to anything, anywhere.

So that's how Ed Muskie started the show in the St. John Valley and Aroostook County, because of his knowledge and capability of explaining to us commoners. The population there had heard only a Republican song for so many years. For anybody, especially somebody of a Polish orientation, for years, to come and tell us Franco-Americans how the show is being run was a surprise to us all. Because, we had never heard that kind of song other than the Republican philosophy that: "You've got to vote Republican, otherwise the state is going to go to hell and back."

TO: Getting back to this meeting with Dorsky and with Don, what do you think changed in the labor movement? I interviewed Denny Blais a while back and he told us a little bit about the

evolution of labor and its coupling with the Democratic Party. What do you think were, besides Ed Muskie and the actual, who were some of the other people, should I say, that helped couple the labor union up north with the Democrats?

EL: Jeez, I should have a list of those that became Democrats at the time that Ed Muskie was running for office. And Don Nicoll, you know Don Nicoll. I'm only going to say very few words, that Don Nicoll and Ed Muskie were just about as big a team of a hundred people with one frame of mind. And the intelligence of Don Nicoll at that time, who was running the show from the road, was just about as savvy and political man that I had ever met or even spoken to. Because he was so quiet and reserved, because he was running Ed Muskie's show, all the time. And so he was not supposed to be looked at as the head honcho. Ed Muskie was the head honcho, and only one. Don Nicoll was so savvy in the organization, talent, that I learned from him to understand that you don't have to crucify the others in order to win your election. You tell them what you're for and how you plan to get to be where you are and what you're looking for. Don Nicoll was the one that I would talk to, to get the inner circles of what Ed Muskie was going to be there for. He was the internal organization that was so versed in the political arena, that it probably took me five or six years to even break the ice to meet what we were supposed to be doing. But Nicoll was the center point of Ed Muskie's organization, as far as I know, from day one.

TO: How did you get involved with the legislature?

EL: Because there was, there was nobody else that wanted to run. And nobody, when I say nobody else, nobody that was now registered as a Democrat in Madawaska that wanted to run. Because it always . . . The population had been introduced to Republicans for so many years that Democrats thought that this was their arena. And, you know, you just don't barge in to an arena of that nature, for the simple reason that you're not going to be able to get your point of view because the Republicans are going to run the show. So my not knowing any better, I thought, "Well, we're going to have to break that little organization that they've got." I first accepted to be the first Democrat chairman in Madawaska after so many years, after at least fifty years. The Republicans were running the shows and I was a Democrat. I was voted the Democratic chairman, and we were looking for representatives. The labor movement from the point of view that I was concerned with was Democrats, or the philosophy of their thinking was Democrats. And at that point, this is where Don Nicoll would make the greatest impression on me and the committee that I was working with for the Democrats. And then Ed Muskie was going to be our leader for a good many years as governor of the state of Maine, which in Aroostook County it would have been unknown to a lot of people to have a Democrat for governor. It was just unheard to have that kind of political organization in the valley and in the county.

TO: When did you run for legislature the first time?

EL: Nineteen-sixty, the election of 1960.

TO: What prompted you to run? I mean, Ed Muskie was out of office, he was in Washington now. Was the Democratic Party still strong (*unintelligible phrase*)?

Mrs. L: He wanted to get involved. I'll enter that.

EL: I wanted to get involved in the political arena. And for us that was relatively unknown because, you know, working in the paper mills, you just did not think of running for office if the office was in Augusta, Maine, the state capitol. It was, for a long, long time, and even to this day I think, you know, "How come I got so foolish all of a sudden and think . . .?" Well, you know, running for office, and even running for office, local office, was fine as a councilman, or board of selectmen, but to run for political office where you have to go down to the capital to do business with the Capitol, that was relatively unknown to people in my line of work for some years.

TO: You were still working at the paper mill?

Mrs. L: Yeah, he had a leave of absence.

EL: Yeah, I had a leave of absence after elected.

TO: But before you got elected you were still, what were you doing at the paper mill?

EL: I was a tool and die maker and a machinist at Frazier Paper for as long as I was there. And then I became foreman of maintenance . . .

Mrs. L: That was quite a while after.

EL: Yes, that was quite a while after but it was as a result of my being . . .

Mrs. L: That's when they put him back on the payroll. But when he was running, he ran, he was there ten years, okay? And five terms, and when he first started there . . .

TO: This is in Augusta?

Mrs. L: No, no, this was in Madawaska. When he started at the legislature, he was on leave of absence for the length of the legislature. They did let him run, but it was without pay. And it was a big transition for him when he come back from legislature to go back to the paper mill. You know, he really enjoyed what he was doing, and the people voted him back in all the time. And another thing that he did that I should tell you, which I don't know that he will. He kept the people in his district informed on what was going on in Augusta, with the House papers and the bills coming up and all that. He kept them informed. Now they have never had anyone there that cared for them that way, and it was the talk of the town how Emilien would send mail. It didn't cost him anything, you know, it cost the state a bit, but he kept them informed as to the goings on in Augusta. With some of them, they never knew except what they read maybe in the weekly paper or the daily paper or, which was The Bangor Daily. And that was Republican anyways, you know. They never had anyone there that cared for them the way he did. I feel I have to tell you that.

TO: Now were you in the House of Representatives or the Senate?

EL: No, I was in the House.

TO: The House.

EL: All the ten years, I was in the House. The reason why she said that is, they never had any direct mail from the members of the House of Representatives in Madawaska or members of the Senate from Madawaska that would give direct information that came from their representative or their senator. And to me, I thought the only way that I could let the people know what I was doing and what needed to be done at the Capitol of the state of Maine. So every week, every week I would sit down . . . I had the availability of a secretary that would do the typing and mailing from the State House to I don't know how many. I didn't count the numbers that I would send because whatever people showed any interest in wanting any information, I had their names and address and telephone and that's the way it worked. So after a while, like Augie says, the people in the St. John Valley or Madawaska and St. David and Van Buren and Frenchville, my district, they were amazed at what was going on in Augusta because they had never heard any of that information available ahead of time, other than what was in the paper and that was Republican in the first degree. And they played their game well, and for a long time that was the information the population there was getting.

So it became, and that's where Don Nicoll, Don Nicoll, I think they had their office in Bangor for a while, and they had an office that they would come to, in Presque Isle, that they could consolidate their work force and their information from other places in the valley where there was no available office space. So Don Nicoll being the intellectual of Democrats as we looked at it then, put information together for, after Ed Muskie was running for office and ran for office and won big in the St. John Valley. How in the rest of the county I don't remember what the percentages were . . .

TO: Was this for Senate?

EL: For governor.

TO: Oh, back for governor. Oh, ok.

EL: For governor. But the outcome of the votes in the St. John Valley never went below eight to two or seven to three, and in some cases even better than that. When the elections came out and you'd take the counts, the Democrats in the St. John Valley was nothing less than eight to two, in those days. That was a brand-new organization.

TO: What were the big issues when you were in the legislature that affected the St. John Valley, or some of the big issues?

EL: Primarily the organization of the Democrats as in its interest with the work force, which was what my entry was with, and helping, helping to improve the roads that went up to the St. John Valley. I got to be very familiar with the commissioner of roads and highways. That

worked very well, very well because at least they were aware of what needed to be done to the roads that came up the St. John Valley. That was the primary thing. And then the labor unions were able to work in to, with their town committees in all of the towns of the St. John Valley and also Aroostook County, of what needed to be done as far as organizational staff to find out how they can improve their wages, how they can improve their work force as well as their relationship with labor unions.

Mrs. L: The first one, yeah. And he ran, what, two terms I think.

EL: Yeah, two years.

TO: Is this Frank Rowe?

EL: Frank Rowe, yes, two years.

TO: He was the first person from Madawaska to be a . . .

Mrs. L: To be a Democratic . . .

TO: When was that?

Mrs. L: Just before him.

TO: Okay, so he kind of rode the Muskie Democratic revival.

Mrs. L: He did a lot of arm-twisting to get him to run, because the school wouldn't let him go any more.

EL: They let him run for two terms and they told him after two terms . . .

Mrs. L: So when Muskie went in, it had to be Frank Rowe. Now, before Frank Rowe, I don't know.

EL: It was Michaud. What was her name now? It was a woman. Jeez.

Mrs. L: Michaud? She was Republican, though.

EL: She was Republican, oh yes. Frank Rowe was the first Democrat.

Mrs. L: Yup, first Democrat. And then he did a lot of arm twisting here to get him to go.

EL: Yeah, because he was given the understanding that they were going to let him go to the legislature for two terms, two two-year terms. So that was four years. But after that they would not give him a leave of absence to leave as a school teacher.

TO: How did the economy of the county change when you were in the legislature?

EL: Presque Isle Air Force Base, after Limestone Air Force Base, the paper industry as well as the agricultural industry, was better organized to distribute their product from out of the county. So that organization put together in those days and years was the primary organization, how it all grew to what it had been for quite a while. The start was Loring Air Force, uh, Presque Isle Air Force Base.

Mrs. L: Yeah, but that was established during the war here. You didn't have anything to do with that.

EL: I didn't say that, I didn't say that. The economy of Aroostook County is what he wanted to know.

Mrs. L: Yeah, when you were there.

EL: When I was there. And the economy of Aroostook County was primarily the results of the Presque Isle Air Force Base, Loring Air Force Base, which they bought land and development . . .

TO: Loring or Limestone?

EL: Limestone.

Mrs. L: Same thing.

TO: Oh, the same thing.

Mrs. L: It was called Loring Air Force Base.

EL: Loring was what the name of it was. And it developed into a large area which took contractors, people from Fort Kent to Houlton, for working for contractors in developing Loring Air Force Base, and also extending the Presque Isle Air Force Base, which was the interest of the entire county as far as work force was concerned. All the contractors from all over the place were in such need because it was a big development as far as contractors were developing the land for, they dug holes underground for storage of military equipment and ammunition. That was the principal place that they were storing ammunition or war material that were unknown to the rest of the population. That was the development of Loring, and they had made up the military Air Force business at Presque Isle Air Force Base, which had been established just before the war. So that was the development of Aroostook County. And then the development of the pulp and paper industry and the woods operations with the logs and everything else, also became a good organization, because they were cutting lumber for distribution not only for Madawaska mill, but for any of the other paper mills or saw mills anywheres in the state or anywheres in New England.

TO: Can you tell me a little bit about Elmer Violette, Floyd Harding and John Martin, the other people from Aroostook who were important? Now, were they all Democrats?

EL: Uh-hunh. Oh yes, they had to be Democrat. Floyd Harding was just about the key in Aroostook County, not in the valley, in Aroostook County.

Elmer Violette was the key for a long time in, started in the St. John Valley, from Van Buren. Then he became a state senator for Aroostook County. Elmer, when he was elected to the Senate, he had run for the house and he was elected for the House, and when he ran for the Senate was also a leader in the Senate, which was relatively unknown to have a Democratic leader in the state Senate. And Elmer was that spearhead as far as Democrats were concerned. Elmer was well educated and he had a wife that was very helpful to him and concerned of Aroostook County surviving.

And Floyd Harding was also the senator, Floyd Harding was the senator of Presque Isle, and for all practical purposes, a Democrat from Presque Isle, Maine, was relatively unknown. For anybody that had the savvy of running for election as a Democrat in Presque Isle in Aroostook County at first was relatively unknown. Like they did in the valley, the population got used to their talent and their capability of having good organizational staff to help them in the political arena. So Floyd was, he was savvy. Well, he was an attorney, so he knew what was in the political arena by virtue of his understanding of what the parties were and what the laws were, and what they need to do to change the law. Sometimes just a few words in a paragraph makes an entirely different purpose for that paragraph or that law. And Floyd Harding was very meticulous in being able to come up with those changes that were proposed from somebody else but just a few key words changed made a difference. And Floyd was ideal as far as I was concerned as a political leader in the Senate. He became the Senate floor leader and did a good job in the Senate. And he was very well-liked and he spoke well. He didn't have to use any harsh language to make his point; he made his point to the rest of the Senate with distinction, and they understood exactly what he meant after a while. So when Floyd Harding had the floor in the Senate, the rest of the Senate knew exactly what he was there for, and how well he explained his points of view.

TO: What about John Martin and Elmer Violette?

EL: And John Martin, John Martin took my place in the House. I was elected the majority leader, the first majority floor leader in the House of Representatives, for I don't know how many years.

TO: In 1965?

EL: In 1965, when the entire legislature became Democrat, which was unknown phraseology to use on the third floor of the State House.

TO: Now, John Reed was governor?

EL: John Reed was governor at the time, yes. And John Martin was more or less, of course he was a young fellow as far as the rest of the House was concerned, but he was very smart and he did his homework. He probably spent as many long hours at night in the State House where we

had a two-room office as Democrats. And I spent also I don't know how many hours or many nights there, and John Martin did. Which he was a single guy and I was married. And he was a single guy and came to the house at night and worked and worked and worked and he knew when he went to the floor of the House he knew just exactly what he was going to talk about and what he was going to say. Because he worked at it the night before or two, three nights before. And that's how John Martin became . . . he was my, oh, I don't know what do you call, mentor or . . . ?

TO: He was younger than you were, wasn't he?

EL: He was my follower I guess.

TO: Protégé.

EL: Protégé in that language. Because I left, at the time that I left the leadership of the house, I was elected by the Democrats in the House majority floor leader for the first time that they've had a floor leader in the House. And then the two following terms I was the House minority floor leader for four years.

TO: What do you mean the first time they had a maj-, the first time the Democrats had a majority floor leader?

EL: Yeah, in my knowledge.

TO: Yeah, okay, I was just clarifying. It wasn't the first time there was a majority leader.

EL: No, because, you know, forty-five years, fifty years before they had a floor leader, they had Democratic leaders in the legislature. But this was the first time that they had a House majority floor leader in as many years as forty-five or fifty years. Because I'd have to check what the records were. And then after '64, '65, we lost a majority leader in the House and in the Senate, so I became House minority floor leader for two terms. And then that was my ten years. I had more or less swore to myself that, you know, after, I first started that I was going to run for the legislature for two years, one term, just to find out how the system functions. I ended up with doing five terms, ten years. And in that ten-year period having been the majority floor leader; in two terms the minority floor leader, that was six out of ten years. And that's when I gave up. I told the wife and the family that this was going to be the end of it. And that's where John Martin took over.

TO: What about Elmer Violette?

EL: Elmer Violette was in the Senate and he was the floor leader for two terms, for one term in the Senate. And being an attorney also from Van Buren, he was very, very conscientious about his election into office, very conscientious. And, oriented under the Ed Muskie, Ed Muskie gavel and ways of doing things from the beginning, followed through the St. John Valley Democrat for the Senate for as many years as he would have liked to, I guess. And he was a smart Democrat from the valley from day one. And anybody that would come, run for political

office in the St. John Valley and Aroostook County, first they would stop in Presque Isle and see Floyd Harding, who was the mighty force as far as the Democrats were in that part of the country, and then stop to see Elmer Violette in Van Buren. And that's how the system was functioning, was through those people for the start of development of Democrats in Aroostook County, which was a hard pill to take from day one.

TO: What happened? Why did the Democratic Party lose the seats that made you change from House majority leader in 1966 into House minority leader? What happened?

EL: Well, we had become Democrat leaders in the State House by a very, very small margin in the first place. And because of that margin being relatively small, it more or less told the Republicans, "Look, you've lost the offices, the majority office. So put your act together and bring your work force as Republicans back to normal. And bring people for election that are knowledgeable, so that you won't be second hand in any of the elections." And that's how . . . We won the majority office by virtue of a very small margin and because of who the leaders in the House and the Senate were, organized to have leadership in both the House and the Senate for two years. And then after that of course it cost a lot of money and the Democrats then did not have any money to run for office.

TO: One last question, what do you think Ed Muskie's biggest contribution to the state of Maine was?

EL: Ed Muskie's contribution had to be related to his knowledge of the system and his capability of getting people in the House and the Senate to see his point of view in voting, getting enough votes to support Ed Muskie's philosophy, his thinking and his working relationship with the general public. He had such a relation, a common relationship with the general public, that nobody that I'm aware of would even think that Ed Muskie, in those years, had anything other than full knowledge of the Maine system. And have elections on things that they would never have voted for in the legislative branch while the, Ed Muskie was in the State House, because Ed Muskie was their leader. And if Ed Muskie said we needed this for the development of Maine, not only Aroostook County but for the development of Maine, that's exactly what they voted for. Ed Muskie said that this was going to be something good for Maine, which they had never heard of before. All of a sudden they had a new goal, they had a new project to work on. And that's how the development was in those days.

TO: All right, thank you.
End of interview.

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