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## Marcotte, Roland oral history interview

Don Nicoll

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## **Interview with Roland Marcotte by Don Nicoll**

*Summary Sheet and Transcript*

### **Interviewee**

Marcotte, Roland

### **Interviewer**

Nicoll, Don

### **Date**

August 25, 1998

### **Place**

Lewiston, Maine

### **ID Number**

MOH 044

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### **Biographical Note**

Roland Marcotte was born in Lewiston on March 25, 1918 to Regina (Deshaies) and Jean Baptiste Marcotte. He was educated at St. Peter's School of Lewiston, and graduated from Lewiston High School. In 1936, he went to work for Standard Brands, and then enlisted in the Air Force in 1940, training as a pilot. He translated for French Pilots in America during the war. In 1949, he began selling cars at Puritan Chevrolet. He then sold cars for Allard Chevrolet, which he bought and operated until he sold the company in 1982. He served as Mayor of Lewiston as a Democrat in 1952, 1953, and 1964. He has since changed his affiliation to Republican. He initiated the Lewiston Development Department in 1953, and began the rhetoric that Lewiston and Auburn should become one city. At the time of the interview, he lived in Auburn.

### **Scope and Content Note**

Interview includes discussions of: military service; Lewiston/Auburn automobile dealerships; Center St. Auburn development; Lewiston snow storm election of 1951; Lewiston/Auburn tensions; relations between Franco-Americans and Yankees; Lewiston Development Department; Frank Coffin; and merging Lewiston and Auburn.

## **Indexed Names**

Allard, Bill  
Bruno, J. Dennis  
Coffin, Frank Morey  
Cortell, Shepard  
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Marcotte, Roland  
Muskie, Edmund S., 1914-1996

## **Transcript**

**Don Nicoll:** We are interviewing Roland Marcotte on the 25th of August, 1998. Roland, would you state your full name for us?

**Roland Marcotte:** Roland Louis Marcotte.

**DN:** When were you born?

**RM:** March 25th, 1918.

**DN:** And where were you born?

**RM:** In Lewiston.

**DN:** What were the names of your parents, Roland?

**RM:** Jean and Regina Marcotte.

**DN:** Were they from Lewiston, or had they come here from elsewhere?

**RM:** My father came here from Canada at the age of fifteen; my mother was a native of Auburn.

**DN:** Did your father come to work in the mills or with his family?

**RM:** No, he came to work in business. He worked with, he made a store with the Bradbury, it was Marcotte & Bradbury on Lisbon Street. And he had that for a few years. And then he became a salesman for Berry Paper Company on Lisbon Street, and he was there many years.

**DN:** Now, did he do that when he first came from Canada, or was he in school when he came?

**RM:** No, he wasn't in school in America at all. He was about fifteen years old and that was the end of his school.

**DN:** Like a lot of people at that time.

**RM:** Yeah, apparently.

**DN:** What was it like growing up in Lewiston in, let's see, from 19-, you probably remember from 1920 on?

**RM:** Well, I think it was a strictly Canadian, and there was always a battle between Auburn and Lewiston anyways because it was known as Yankees and Canadians. But it changed eventually.

**DN:** You, now, you went to Lewiston schools?

**RM:** Yes.

**DN:** Did you go to the public schools?

**RM:** I went to St. Peter's School for grammar school, then I went to Lewiston High School, which I graduated from. And that was the end of my schooling.

**DN:** You finished high school and then you went on to work.

**RM:** Right.

**DN:** And where did you work?

**RM:** Well, I first went to work for Standard Brands, Inc. which at that time was selling for Tender Leaf Tea and Royal Gelatins and coffee. And I was with them for quite awhile until I went into the service.

**DN:** So in some ways you were following in your father's footsteps.

**RM:** Yes.

**DN:** By the way, did you have any brothers or sisters?

**RM:** Yes, I had two sisters and two brothers.

**DN:** And did they tend to follow the same line of work?

**RM:** Well, not too much. The brothers were more in the mill type thing, and my sisters were clerks, you know.

**DN:** Now you said that you were, you entered the service.

**RM:** Yeah, I went in the service a year before the war started because I volunteered in January of 1940 for one year, and the war was declared in December. And when I saw that happen I figured I'd be in for quite a while. And I joined the Air Force pilot training program and became a pilot in '41.

**DN:** And where did you train?

**RM:** I trained in the South, you know, mostly. I can't remember the names of the training places.

**DN:** But fields in the South.

**RM:** Yeah, Maxwell Field was a, the primary one.

**DN:** And where did you serve after training?

**RM:** Well, what happened, I was getting ready for, I was doing my training, after graduation, I was doing my training in gunnery, you know. And what happened is that they came to me and, because I was French-speaking they came to me and wanted me to be liaison officer for the French pilot training program in America. And these pilots came, these people came from Africa at the time. And we were at several posts in the United States and I traveled, I kept the officers in charge, flying them into various schools because they couldn't speak English and couldn't fly, although they were pilots themselves.

**DN:** So you were flying transport service essentially.

**RM:** Yeah. And then I was also the person that checked the freshman class to see if they passed, and I was checking all the French pilots.

**DN:** So you were a combination interpreter, pilot and trainer.

**RM:** Right. And I never went to Foreign Service because they kept me right here. I had no choice.

**DN:** When the war ended and you left the service, did you have any interest in continuing with flying?

**RM:** No, I didn't. No, I left it right away. I was discharged in October 1945, which was almost five years that I was in the service, and I went right back to work for Standard Brands for a

couple of years.

**DN:** So you were there until, what, '47?

**RM:** Yes, '47 or '48.

**DN:** And then what did you do?

**RM:** Then I went in to the automobile business as a salesman for Puritan Chevrolet on Main Street in Auburn. George Davis was the owner. And later on I went to Allard Chevrolet which is in Auburn also. Bill Allard was from, I think he was from Rhode Island and he owned Allard Chevrolet in Auburn, which I eventually bought out. And then I expanded onto Center Street and I built a building there in 1965 I think.

**DN:** So you went from salesman to manager to owner.

**RM:** Yes, eventually.

**DN:** Did you ever expect to get into the auto business when you ...?

**RM:** No. I really just got in it by accident because I wanted to make a change from Standard Brands. And I knew, I got to know George Davis, and he encouraged me to become a salesman, so that's what I did. I was the first to build a new building on Center Street, and Center was just a two-lane highway at the time. And I bought a fairly big cow farm to get it started, and eventually in 1982 Louis Chevrolet bought the plant.

**DN:** So you were really a pioneer in all that commercial development that's gone on on Center Street.

**RM:** Quite a bit, I think, because I was the first new building in the area.

**DN:** The car dealerships were quite different then from what they are now.

**RM:** Oh yes, far different. Right now they're much bigger because they have several brands that they sell. And in my day, Chevrolet was the only car that I sold at all.

**DN:** Now what got you involved in politics in Lewiston?

**RM:** Well, my brother-in-law, Arthur Hopkins, was an alderman for two or three years, and he used to talk about it all the time. And then he decided to quit running for alderman and he encouraged me to take it up, and that's how I got started. So I ran for alderman and got beat the first time, and then I won for two different terms. And then I ran for mayor and got beat by Malenfant, and then I won two terms as mayor. And then I didn't run for ten years until 1964.

**DN:** Now that first victory for mayor was unusual in some ways, as I recall.

**RM:** Well, I can't remember too much about it, but . . .

**DN:** Wasn't that the famous snow storm election?

**RM:** Yes, it was, yeah. As a matter of fact, the first election was canceled, and that was the first time they ever canceled an election. And I was taken for a ride in one of the city tractors to go to the polling place to make sure I was there on the day of the election. And they were kind enough to do that because I couldn't, you couldn't drive a car anywhere.

**DN:** And, but in the rescheduled election you won and then you won again.

**RM:** Yes, yeah. I had two terms and I ended up in 1964 [*sic* 1954], and then ran ten years later. In my first elections, you took office in November and ran for a year, and in 1964 they had changed it to, you got into office on January 1 for the year. I didn't run again, but, I've been out of politics ever since.

**DN:** And you never ran for the state legislature?

**RM:** No. No, I was really a one-man operation in my Chevrolet dealership and I was really too busy. I shouldn't have even run in 1964, but I did. And then I really had to quit politics to keep my business going, because I was one of the few dealers probably that started with nothing.

**DN:** So it was a constant struggle to stay on top of it.

**RM:** Yeah. When I bought Allard Chevrolet I paid nothing down and I worked from there to own the business.

**DN:** That's an impressive accomplishment.

**RM:** It was tough.

**DN:** Now, did you run into, you mentioned that George Davis had encouraged you to get into car sales. Did you run into problems with the Anglo community as you were starting up your business?

**RM:** I don't really think so, because I was kind of an individual that really mixed up with all kinds of people. And I don't think I was hurt that bad being a Frenchman at the time. They almost threw me out of the country when I, in 1964 I recommended that the two cities join, and a lot of people didn't like that. And I think the reason that it was, that Auburn was mostly ...

**DN:** Mostly Yankee?

**RM:** ... Yankees, and Lewiston was mostly Canadians, and I couldn't sell it. I tried like the devil for a whole year but I couldn't sell the idea. And I still think I was right.

**DN:** Well, now they talk about them as the ACities of the Androscoggin.®

**RM:** Yes, that's right. But I think at the time they should have joined and it was a time that was ready for it. And I think being one large community would have had better effect in getting more jobs and competing with Portland.

**DN:** Were jobs a major factor when, or the issue of jobs a major factor when you were mayor?

**RM:** I think it was for most of the time.

**DN:** Did you regard your mayor's role as non-partisan?

**RM:** Yes, I did. As a matter of fact, and Shep<sup>1</sup> knows, that I was born a Democrat and some fifteen, twenty years ago I joined the Republican Party. And so I've been a mixture all around I guess. I was never just a one-party person.

**DN:** When did you start thinking of switching parties?

**RM:** I started a long time ago. I was very, unlike Muskie, I was very conservative. I guess that's my way of my being born. I think Canadians were conservative themselves, but they were all Democrats at that time. But I didn't enjoy seeing the government turning into a big spending-type government because I was conservative, and that's what maybe made me join the Republican Party at the time. I'm not sure now that any of them have stopped spending, but . . . .

**DN:** Was your father a Democrat?

**RM:** Yes, my mother and my whole family. As I said before, we were born Democrats.

**DN:** Now were they conservative, though?

**RM:** Yes, they were. And that's what I think made me change my mind to become a Republican eventually. They were very conservative.

**DN:** Where did they live in Lewiston?

**RM:** I was born on Pierce Street and they rented a second floor apartment from a Mr. Mottram at the time. And next door was a three story apartment house and that's where my parents lived for quite awhile. But they were the first ones to build a new house on the corner of Central Avenue and Vale Street, and they were there quite awhile.

**DN:** Now when they built the house on Central Avenue and Vale, was that a single-family house for them?

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<sup>1</sup>Shep Cortell, a friend of Roland Marcotte who accompanied him at the interview. See also: MOH\_059, for an interview with Shep Cortell.

**RM:** Yes. It was two floors but it was a single-family home. As a matter of fact it was large because it had eleven rooms, and the five children all lived there at the time. We all went through and walked to high school as a matter of fact, and while we were there we watched the Armory being built. So it was a busy place. And we walked all the time to St. Peter's School. We walked in the morning at eight o'clock, to get to school at eight, and school ended at eleven, we walked back for lunch at Central Avenue, and then walked back to St. Peter's at one o'clock, and were done at school at four and walked back all the time.

**DN:** You got your exercise. You still walk?

**RM:** Yes, I do.

**DN:** Some habits don't change.

**RM:** Yeah. As a matter of fact, I'm on the cardiac rehab program so I get exercise three times a week.

**DN:** Now when, do you remember when you first met Ed Muskie?

**RM:** I really don't remember exactly, but I think it was at a meeting that we had in Lewiston. And I don't remember the subject, but I remember meeting him there. And I never saw him that often actually because I think we were opposites.

**DN:** In what ways?

**RM:** Well, I think he was very liberal and I think I was very conservative, and that made a difference in the two of us.

**DN:** Now as mayor did you have many dealings with state government?

**RM:** Not too many. Although we, I was responsible to appoint a development director for Lewiston, the first one in the state of Maine as a matter of fact. And he was very active with Augusta. He took my place.

**DN:** Who was that?

**RM:** I can't remember his name now.

**Shep Cortell:** Was it Sam?

**RM:** No. He came ...

**SC:** Oh, I know, Italian fellow.

**RM:** He came from Boston. I interviewed him and I thought he was experienced in developing in the Boston area. And with the approval of the council I hired him and so forth. And he stayed

there quite awhile.

**DN:** Now there were some major problems with the Bates Mill, I guess it was shortly after you were mayor. And were you involved in economic development work at that time? As a businessman?

**RM:** Yes. I was really very interested and spent a lot of time at it. I don't know as I can be that specific right now. But, and that's why I guess I got very interested in development director because you couldn't spend that much time as an individual being a part-time mayor. But it was very successful I think.

**DN:** The, you mentioned earlier that you were not able to spend much time on politics because the business was very demanding. What do you regard as your major accomplishments as mayor?

**RM:** I think in trying to join the two cities and getting the two councils to work together. I think that I was responsible to help create jobs in the Lewiston and Auburn area actually for quite awhile, and I think that was my best accomplishment.

**DN:** Were you at all involved in the formation of the Androscoggin Valley Council of Governments?

**RM:** Yes, I was involved in it. I don't know just how active I was in it, but I was involved.

**DN:** Did that come after your proposal for joining the two cities?

**RM:** Yes, it did. I still think that the only reason the two cities didn't join is because of the background of the people.

**DN:** The conflict between the Yankees and ...

**RM:** And Canadians.

**DN:** ... Franco-Americans. And do you think that division has been reduced over the years?

**RM:** I think it's been greatly reduced and . . . . You know, in my younger years, even when I started high school, I could hardly speak English and that has changed a lot. Like, my family, my three children only speak English; they've never spoken French because my wife is Irish. And I think that's true about all the families in the area. Some of them, when I was young I remember my mother speaking French almost all the time. My father started speaking English early because he was a traveling salesman and he had to speak English. And then my mother never did too well in English at all, but eventually she was able to listen and speak some.

**DN:** But she was born in Auburn?

**RM:** In Auburn, yeah.

**DN:** Did she grow up in New Auburn?

**RM:** Yes, yeah, all her life.

**DN:** And the family spoke French, I gather.

**RM:** Yes, they did. We used to go there every Sunday night and we'd have to speak French. But we did speak French anyways because we weren't speaking English at that time very much.

**DN:** You spoke French at home, and was French the language at St. Peter's?

**RM:** Yes, well, yes it was pretty much. I think until I got my, in the seventh and eighth grades is when the brothers of the Sacred Heart Society came in and started teaching those two grades for the boys, and they were talking English. So that's when we really started, somewhat at least. When I got in high school that's all I did and finally learnt to speak English.

**DN:** Was it very difficult for you in high school because of the language difference?

**RM:** Not too bad, because I had started to change earlier and was coming along decent I guess.

**DN:** And in your business this was not a problem.

**RM:** No, because by the time I got in business and was, particularly the years that I was traveling for Standard Brands, you know, I'd go all over the state. So I'd speak English all the time and it was no trouble.

**DN:** When you were in the Air Force and you were working as liaison with the French pilots, did you find their French much different from your French?

**RM:** A little bit different but not bad enough at the time, because I was still young enough and hadn't left the French language. If that was today, I would have a real bad time because I never speak French now and I stutter.

**DN:** Now as mayor you had limited dealings, I gather, with state government, and you don't remember anything specific about ...

**RM:** Not really. I was so busy being mayor, I couldn't really do anything else.

**DN:** And did the federal programs affect you much as mayor at that time?

**RM:** Not too much. You know, the, maybe I'll be speaking out of tune, but I followed Malenfant and two or three other mayors that really just spoke French particularly, and weren't really experienced going outside of Lewiston at all. And that confined them to really do just maybe a few things in Lewiston and I don't think they came up with too many different good ideas, or new ideas. And I think I was quite a change for the two years, two first years I was in.

I'm not bragging about it, but I think I brought a change in government thinking, among the aldermen and everybody else.

**DN:** How did you do that?

**RM:** Well, I did it because I appointed a lot of people that weren't French background, like [J. Dennis] Bruno<sup>2</sup>, like him, and I got women involved.

**DN:** Who were some of the women you got involved in politics?

**RM:** I don't know if I can remember. It was so long ago that.

**DN:** Who were some of your political allies during that period?

**RM:** Well, Bruno was a real strong supporter of mine, and so was Shep here. And we spent a lot of time together talking about what should be done or going on in the government, and then I would bring back a lot of the different ideas to the aldermen. Because the aldermen didn't change too much because, like you mentioned, Paul Couture was there a long, long time and their background and thinking was still Canadian-type and wasn't objective enough, I don't think. That's only my thinking, you know.

**DN:** Were you part of the Marois group, the folks who ate lunch regularly at Marois?

**RM:** I went there quite often, yeah. I remember the wife, the mother, was it the wife or the mother, I can't, I went there quite often but ...

**SC:** George.

**RM:** It was George?

**DN:** Did some of the people you brought in to city government continue in city politics?

**RM:** Yes, quite a few of them because I appointed a lot of different people to the boards, and that's what kept them going. They weren't, maybe they weren't involved in elections, but they were involved in government a lot and were very active.

**DN:** What, we've talked generally about new approaches that you tried, in part bringing different people in. Can you remember some of the specific kinds of programs that were promoted by the people who came on board because of you?

**RM:** I honestly can't remember. It's a little too long I guess.

**DN:** Did they have to do with economic development or public works?

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<sup>2</sup>J. Dennis Bruno, director of economic development for the city of Lewiston, to whom Roland Marcotte referred earlier.

**RM:** Yes, because I had a good Board of Finance quite awhile. And I gave George Maher, the public works director, a lot of support and good members on that board as well. And I think I tried to do a real good job in appointments. People that were active in their own business or somewhat in politics but got used to politics and became active.

**DN:** Did the mayors who were there before you tend to appoint people who were political cronies, or, how did they look on the Finance Board and the Public Works Board, for example?

**RM:** I think they appointed mostly people that were very closely related to themselves, rather than new people that they might meet or someone. That's why I think it got into a somewhat of a rut, I thought, that was my own thinking. You know, maybe nobody else thought of it that way. Maybe I was just different than a lot of others that were there.

**DN:** Now you've said two things about your political philosophy. One was that you were conservative in terms of spending and the second that you looked on the city boards as a way to change government by appointments. Had you come to that conclusion while you were an alderman?

**RM:** Yes, I had, yeah. That's why I was able to make a lot of changes very fast. I think things really worked decently, you know, for awhile.

**DN:** Now you did not know Ed Muskie very well, but you knew Frank Coffin.

**RM:** Yes.

**DN:** When had you gotten to know Frank?

**RM:** Well, Frank Coffin and I went to school at the same time pretty much. And when I was still young I used to pass the *Evening Journal* paper and one of the customers was his mother on Wood Street, and so I got to know him very well. As a matter of fact, I appointed him as corporation counsel for the first year I was in office.

**DN:** What was Frank like in high school?

**RM:** He was very likeable and very smart of course, and a very honest person I think. And he was very active, too. He was a very good person to know. I spent a lot of time with Frank.

**DN:** Did you spend a lot of time with him when you were in high school or is this later?

**RM:** In high school as well, yeah.

**DN:** Now he was a Yankee, ...

**RM:** Yes.

**DN:** ... and how did he relate to his French friends in school?

**RM:** Well, he did well, I think. And one of the reasons might have been that I spent a lot of time with him, and he didn't mind mixing up at all. He was very understanding of the situation.

**DN:** Did you play sports together?

**RM:** No, Frank didn't get too involved in sports. I played hockey for the Cyclones and I played football for Lewiston High, but he wasn't too active in sports.

**DN:** How was he in class?

**RM:** Very, very sharp. First in his class mostly.

**DN:** What did he do for you as mayor when he was corporation counsel?

**RM:** Well he was very good at explaining situations and also making recommendations for new things to happen. Or, if I discussed things with him he would give his opinion fully and not be scared of hurting my feelings.

**DN:** Do you still see Frank at all?

**RM:** Not too much. I'm very friendly, I would be very friendly with him.

**DN:** Do you, when Frank ran for office, were you involved in his campaign?

**RM:** Yes, yeah, I was active in it. Not as a chairman but I was active in it.

**DN:** Did you feel he was more in tune with your political philosophy than, say, Ed Muskie?

**RM:** Yes, he was. I think. I really think.

**DN:** If you were to go back and look at the way you developed your career, who were the great influences on you in the early days?

**RM:** Well as I said, George Davis was a good influence on me, even though I was heading to be, working against his dealership. We were very friendly and I was very friendly for a long, long time with his son, Jack Davis, and so we really never had any trouble. And I think he really helped me even with the banks because he was very active in the bank and I was able to get loans. And that's how I got started, because I had no money at all.

**DN:** And George certainly was not part of the French community.

**RM:** No, but he accepted it I think. I never had any trouble with him according to that, so I think he must have felt that it was a thing that had to happen and it was for the good of the community that they talk to each other.

**DN:** Another businessman who has played an important role, or did play an important role in Maine's life is Jim Longley. How well did you know Jim?

**RM:** Very well. I knew Jim for a long time and I supported him politically and was sorry to see him go, because he did a good job.

*(Unintelligible phrase - Shep and Roland)*

**DN:** Where did you first get to know him?

**RM:** I think it was just through politics that I first got to know him, but it was quite awhile ago. I think, he was very interested when I was mayor and so forth, so I'd known him a long time.

**DN:** How important in the political and economic life of the community was the Chamber of Commerce in Lewiston when you were active?

**RM:** The chamber was fairly active in local politics. And I was in the chamber for a few years myself. I think they were really trying to encourage the situation of getting jobs in the community.

**DN:** What legacy would you like to see your young people have in the city of Lewiston, and Auburn, obviously?

**RM:** I really don't know that, just . . . . I know I was very active in Southern Maine Hospital for some over twenty years; as a matter of fact I was president for a couple years and so forth. I think that they've done a hell of a job for the community. And you see a lot of young people active in, even today. I haven't been there for fifteen or more years I guess but, I encourage a lot of them to be active in it today.

**DN:** Active on the board and volunteer activities. The, what got you involved in the hospital board?

**RM:** Well, the directors, when I was mayor, came to me to become a member of the board. And I went through the chairs, you know, and so forth, and I was there for twenty-two years. That was all the time when I was a car dealer as well and so forth, so I don't know why I joined all those things but I did. I was also director of Central Maine Power for five years, and I was active enough.

**DN:** So you've led an active business, as well as civic, life.

**RM:** Yeah. And eventually, about twenty years ago my wife and I moved in Auburn, and we've lived there ever since. As a matter of fact, I just built a new house a year ago.

**DN:** So you really put your roots down.

**RM:** A lot of people thought I was crazy at my age.

**DN:** Always thinking ahead.

**RM:** Yeah.

**DN:** Good. Well, thanks very much, Roland. This had been very helpful.

**RM:** I thank you very much. I hope I was.

**DN:** You were.