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Interview with Eugene Mawhinney by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Mawhinney, Eugene

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

May 5, 1999

Place

Orono, Maine

ID Number

MOH 086

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Biographical Note

Eugene Mawhinney was born in Jonesboro, Maine in 1921 to Estella (Whitney) and Bert Mawhinney. His father worked in the sawmills of the Jonesboro area. During the Depression, his family moved to Machias so his father could work at the Ford sales office. They returned to Jonesboro in 1931 and he resumed work at a sawmill. He took a post-graduate high school year at Machias High School, and then enrolled in Machias Normal School. In his second year, he took a principal's position in Mechanic Falls. He was then drafted and served in the Army. During his time in the Army, he completed a year and a half of training in electrical engineering at Clemson College. He then served in a signal corps company. Upon his return to the United States, he married his wife, Anne, and completed his undergraduate studies and master's program at Syracuse. He went on to the University of Illinois for his Ph.D. in political science and constitutional law. He taught in Missouri, and at Elmira College, and in 1959, accepted a position at the University of Maine at Orono. He has served on two commissions in the Maine State Government. At the time of this interview, he was teaching at the University of Maine.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Jonesboro, Maine, including during the Depression; the lumber industry in Maine; Louis Brann visiting Machias; Mawhinney's mother as a suffragette;

Maine party politics of the 1930s and 1940s; college in the 1940s; military education and experiences; post-graduate academics; returning to the University of Maine; administrative policy commission; judicial committee; the probate system in Maine; Ed Muskie at the University of Maine, Orono commencement with the Foreign Minister of Canada; Muskie's college student internships; Margaret Chase Smith's lack of college interns; Muskie's legacy on Maine politics; and Don Nicoll.

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Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Prof. Eugene Mawhinney on May 5th, 1999 at his office in South Stevens Hall at the University of Maine, [Orono, Maine]. Prof. Mawhinney, would you please state your full name and spell it?

Eugene Mawhinney: Yes, my name is Eugene Mawhinney, M-A-W-H-I-N-N-E-Y. It's a name of an Irish background, Eugene Mawhinney. I was born in the little town of Jonesboro, Maine in Washington County, about eight miles from Machias, the county, seat of the county in 1921. My parents were Bert and Estella Whitney Mawhinney. There were only two of us, two children in the family, my sister being thirteen years older than me. Always then, there was a convenient babysitter for my parents to go out to play whist on the weekends; it wasn't bridge it was whist.

My father was involved in lumber all of his life just about. I grew up with two sawmills just down over the hill from our home in Jonesboro. One of those sawmills brought the logs out of the mill pond where they had been placed up a sluice way into the mill and the objective of this mill was to saw green lumber which would be aged then in the yards for building, and to cut lathes. And I have visions of hundreds and hundreds of these stacks of lathes being piled in the lumber yard which was down on the river. The river, Chandlerless River, went through the town and, believe it or not, sailing ships would come up into that river to pick up the green lumber and the lathes, and I have some pictures of that in my possession. People looking at the

river today would not believe that.

And then there was a second mill just across the river which he also had third ownership and management responsibility for and this was called a “box mill”. And the boards, some of the boards that were sawed in the first mill would be carried over there and they were made into what were called “shooks” (sp?). Now, these are box material, small pieces of lumber made of the size to make a wooden box to ship things in, and the big consumer of these boxes were the sardine canneries in the area. This was long before cardboard came in as a boxing agent, so there was a big business. And I can remember letterhead sitting on my father’s desk of the William Underwood Company and this red devil symbol for the Underwood Sardine Cannery in Jonesport, Maine. So that, my father was involved with lumber.

Nineteen twenty-nine, thirty, the Depression time hit us hard. People were not building with lumber and at the same time, simultaneously and negatively for his business, shipping began using the cardboard containers instead of wood and so the mills closed. And this was about 1929, 1930 and our family moved to Machias so that he could take temporary employment with his brother who ran the Ford sales agency there. We returned to Jonesboro a year later and picked up the loose ends and carried on.

The religious beliefs in the town This was a town of four hundred and fifty to five hundred [450-500] people and it still remains just about that today, but with a different social context I think. There was one church in the town, a Union church which really was a general Protestant church. And we brought ministers from Machias usually for evening services, and they might have been Congregational as they usually were, or Methodist or Universalist. There were two Catholic families in the town only that I recall, and they would always faithfully go to Machias for the Catholic services on Sunday.

Politics were not discussed around our dinner tables. I look back on that now and wonder just why. I think my parents were probably middle -of -the -road in terms of their politics. , I’m sure they were rather independent in their voting, depending upon the candidates and the issues at the time. A couple of little things I remember from my very, very youthful days, going back, this goes way back now to 1928, wow, when I was seven years old. But I still remember in the school that the teacher held a mock election, and this was the year of the candidacy of Herbert Hoover, Republican and Al Smith, Democrat. And I recall, what reasons I really don’t know or what influences caused me to choose, but I voted for Smith, and I came out on the losing side obviously.

Another political contact experience I remember came four years later with the candidacy of Louis Brann for governor of Maine in 1932. The notice was posted in a local store a few days ahead that he would be stopping at the town square. Now this was not much of a square but at least it was a place where you could drive off and where people could assemble. And so I was there, and I remember the limousine coming in there as Louis Brann shook hands and spoke for a while. And that evening he spoke in Machias and I remember my mother and father and I going

over to hear him as he addressed his audience in Machias from the bandstand there on Main Street in Machias.

A couple of contacts with politics in the early years, but as I said my family really didn't seem to incline strongly one way or the other. I'm not even sure how they were registered. But interestingly enough a history professor just a few years ago came to me and said, "Did you know an Estella Mawhinney?" And I said, "I certainly did, she's my mother." And he said, "Well, I find that when the 19th Amendment was up for consideration that she really was a suffragette, so she was working for the women's vote." That was just before I was born and so, I never even heard her talk about that but I was pleased to hear that that was so.

The community? Downeast Yankee I would say, for the most part. Families that had been there for years and years, not much moving occurred in those days. I recall the annual town meetings, marvelous events as we young folks sat in the balcony and watched the debates going on. Probably about evenly matched in politics as regards political parties in the town. But what I recall, every year there would be arguments over how much the town would spend on the improvement of certain roads. Now at the end of one of these roads that led off Route 1 but was up to the town to care for, was a, were two or three Republican families. And on the other road was a very strong Democratic family, so I witnessed those arguments which took on a political nature as to which road would get more money for the ensuing year to be repaired. I think it came down again to a matter of compromise and probably breaking it just about, about even.

I remember as a young lad selling, from one end of town to the other, (and the distance was quite great, but the population not great), the *Grit* newspaper. We sold that for five cents and I made two cents on every copy which was sold. So that is a memory. When we moved back from Machias to Jonesboro, we had electricity put in to our house, that would have been about 1930, for the first time. So that was very helpful and very pleasing. The high school in town was obviously very small. I was in a class of four, and my wife never ceases to say that I was second in a class of four. Other classes were generally larger than that, but the schools were entirely local. Now of course it's all shifted into school district pattern and those high school students beyond the elementary schools are bussed to either Machias or to East Machias where more go to Washington Academy which is available there.

When I graduated from high school I thought I wanted to go to business college. I had my mind set that I wanted to work in that area. But the fees that the colleges charged and the matter of having to live away from home just added up to too much in those days. Today we would manage that somehow through loans and all. So I did what seemed a practical thing to do:, I took a post -graduate high school year, in other words a fifth year, at Machias High School where I took courses in the commercial area, bookkeeping and stenography even, and courses of that type.

So close to the end of that year a decision had to be made. , I had exhausted essentially the public school possibilities and the natural thing for me to do was to go to what was then the normal

school, which is now, of course, part of the University of Maine System, the college at Machias, and this obviously moved me out of my idea of being an accountant in to being a teacher. And that was pleasant, and it was a good three years there. It was a very excellent experience in practice teaching, as well.

Well, during my senior year in 1942 I remember one Sunday afternoon I was reading, when I was writing some papers, that the news came over the radio that Pearl Harbor had occurred. And I knew then that probably my days would be limited as a student. But I did want to get in some teaching experience if any superintendent would hire me under those conditions, and I hired in a little town of Canaan without visiting it; that's over in the Skowhegan way. I don't know, I think it was about nine hundred dollars for the year. The superintendent and I had not met. I wanted to get in this experience because I knew I was going to go in the service eventually, but if anyone that was willing to gamble on me fine, that would be their problem.

But then a person I had known earlier in grange work . . . , I did not mention that probably the social center of the town was at the grange. And I had worked through the offices there and become master of the grange, so-called the youngest in the state of Maine at the time. Anyway, I got to know this gentleman who became superintendent over in Mechanic Falls, Maine, west of Auburn, and he came after me and I said, "Well, I'm sorry but I've already signed." And he says, "I saw that superintendent at a superintendent's conference and he's willing to release you." And so I signed to be principal of a "middle" school, we'd call it now, the Elm Street School in Mechanic Falls, Maine for the fall. And we started in September. I lasted until just before Christmas before the draft board of Androscoggin County, where he had shifted me to get two weeks more of teaching, came.

And I then went in to the Army at Fort Devons as so many others. I was assigned to the finance office of the 10th Armored Division, 10th Armored Division at Fort Benning, Georgia, and there I started my army life. In the finance office it was very pleasant. That would have been certainly a nice place to stay in the Army if one had to, although the 10th Armored Division was later involved in the Battle of the Bulge in Europe and had a lot of casualties. I don't know what happened to finance officers, I think they probably were carrying guns at that point.

But anyway shortly, oh two or three months after I was in there, the ASTP, or the Army Specialized Training Program started. And I applied for that, was interviewed and was sent to Clemson College in South Carolina for a program in electrical engineering. I had asked for military government during the classification system process and they'd indicated I didn't have enough foreign language background. I ended up in electrical engineering, of all areas, but stayed at Clemson College for a year and a half in electrical engineering. A very excellent experience, a good education in that line which I really didn't use later, but there were five hundred and fifty of us who started that program, and each, after each semester break we'd come back and run to the bulletin board to see who survived. And I was one of the fifty-five, fortunately, who survived. The others had been returned to their units, and those of us who survived to the point when they closed out the ASTP because the demand for soldiers in Europe

was increasing so greatly.

I was sent with this electrical engineering background to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey into the signal corps, and there studied for many months high speed radio communication between air and ground. I went overseas to Europe with a signal corps company. We were stationed outside of Paris in a little old French army barracks area and just awaited being called to the front for the communications. Two of the five- person units who ran the communication teams from air to ground were called and took part in the Rhine crossing at (*name*). I was not called. And one day the captain came to me and he said, "You know, I noticed on your record that you've had some teaching experience, wouldn't you like to go into the information education office in Paris, get some materials, get some help, and have an afternoon class for your colleagues here?" And I said, "I would very much like to do that."

So I did go in to the, to Paris, to the office and I met immediately a major in the education area who had been principal of Newton Massachusetts High School, which was regarded as a very forward -looking high school at that time. And we talked about it and he said, "How would you like to come with me?" And I said, "I would love it." It seemed great to get out of the signal corps and then go with I&E. So I joined I&E shortly after his orders were made and lived at Cite Universitaire and commuted in to Paris daily to the office in I&E. We were then interested in, in fact there's a program that I headed and I have it on my record, to hire English -speaking French persons to teach in the units and the compan-, you know, the companies around to help the fellows out in an educational sense. And I headed that program working with the French department of information in Paris.

The war ended. , I was in Paris when VE -Day came, that was quite a night. I was in Paris when VJ -Day came. And shortly thereafter we moved our unit to Frankfurt, Germany occupying property of the I. G. Farben Works, which was not bombed during the war. And from there I worked with others in setting up courses, furnishing text books, furnishing suggestions as to courses that could be taken by the students in their units. And this involved beautiful travel way down in to Bavaria, (*name*), Austria I remember, and so forth. And it was a way to keep our, keep our Army fellows busy and moving forward while they awaited their number call to come back home. It was a number situation depending on the amount of experience that we had had. So finally my number came up and I returned to, returned home. This was in 1946.

My lady friend was at Syracuse University working on her master's degree and teaching part -time as a graduate assistant. She wrote me every day that I was in the military service so we have quite an accumulation of letters now. So when I was discharged, again at Fort Devons, before I came home I took the train to Syracuse and that fall, in the fall of '46 we were, we were married. I had one more year to get a bachelor's degree after the three -year program at Machias. So I entered the college of education so I could get the degree the following, the Machias work very quickly. The first year I did my bachelor's degree here in education, the second year I did my master's degree in history and government, and the third year I was a teacher in economics, instructor in economics.

In all those three years Ann taught mathematics; she had specialized in mathematics in Syracuse. There was a great influx of soldiers coming back of course to pick up courses in engineering and all, and she had a three-year employment which was excellent for us financially. So we were here living in what was then the South Apartments on the southern part of campus. The rent was thirty-two dollars a month and that included two or three pieces of furniture which the University furnished. The University owned the apartments which had been reconstructed from buildings that were somewhere down on the coast during the war era.

And after three years then we moved to Urbana, Illinois where I started work on my Ph.D. in political science, majoring in constitutional law. These three years were excellent. On the University of Illinois campus, we had an apartment just off campus, a block. At that time our daughter arrived, 1950, and we were proud of her. In fact my wife stayed in the hospital an additional day, which now I guess would be out, in order that I might prepare well for an English legal history test that was coming up. So three years at the University of Illinois and completing the Ph.D., except for the dissertation, which always drags on. In order to be near Illinois and finish that off, I took a position at what was then Northeast Missouri State Teacher's College in Kirksville, Missouri. It is now Truman University and now has turned into a liberal arts school which is very highly rated.

Anyway, we moved to Kirksville, Missouri and I taught there for four years in political science. We made a lot of friends there. We still exchange friendships back and forth, visiting us, will be true this summer as well. And I finished the dissertation and got that taken care of and then was looking for another position more, moving eastward.

We would have loved to come back to the University of Maine at that point, nothing was open then. I took a position in political science at Almira College which was a women's college then entirely, (it is not now), and we were at Almira College for four years. I remember some of my students saying, "We went up to Cornell University last night to hear a speaker, a graduate of the Cornell Law School, by the name of Edmund Muskie. Do you know him?" And I said, "Well I don't know him personally but I certainly highly respect him." And they said, "He's great, he was a tremendous speaker." So that was sort of my introduction in a way. We came back to Orono then in 1959 and Ed Muskie was then in the Senate, you see, at that time. I never had too much personal contact with Ed Muskie, but there were several places here of touch down and communication which I have regarded as very valuable.

When I returned here I took the position which the public administration person had. And though I was not really deeply public administration, I did involve myself with the training programs of the town and city managers of Maine. In fact I directed the institute, the New England Managers Institute for several years and enjoyed that very much. The program here at Maine in training and educating those for city management had been started several years before by Professor Edward Dowe and he was still chairman of the department, was the one who brought me back to Maine. So I filled in heading the annual institute and getting acquainted with

many very top persons and others who hadn't had the educational background but who were doing good jobs managing the smaller towns in Maine. That was a very, very excellent experience.

I came to serve on at least two commissions which were administratively focused in Maine. And I think Don Nicoll may very well have been in on both of those. I know he was, and heading one of them, in which we discussed several aspects of the administrative policy and the administrative organization in Maine in terms of possible changes involved there. Most of my work began moving, or my work began moving more toward the judicial area than the administrative area. I did however serve on two of the reapportionment commissions in Maine in 1970 and 1980, and that was an interesting, an interesting challenge because we had to take the revised population of Maine and redo the house districts in Maine. And we'd start either at Fort Kent or at Kittery, the two different years we started in different places, to redraw the population maps of Maine to set up the representation in the Maine house of representatives.

I had a call one day from Gov. Reed at the time and he asked if I would go on the judicial, go on the Judicial Committee. And I indicated that I would be very happy to do so. This was a judicial commission which had the responsibility of overseeing the operation of the, of the courts in Maine. I should have called it the judicial council is what it was. And it was out of that judicial council, before I arrived there, that the idea for the Maine district court system started, and that as we know came into effect and has been a great, increased. One of the problems we always dealt with, and in the position I'm in now are still dealing with, and that is the probate court system in Maine. Our recommendation from a commission was that the probate system, probate courts, be taken out of politics and essentially out of county government area and be integrated into the judicial system. That has never been done; the power of county politics has preserved the probate court system.

Now today, and for several years, I have been on the judicial ethics committee. This is an advisory committee, judicial ethics, which receives requests from judges only, to give them advice in terms of certain things to do or not to do. It may be a judge is married to a lawyer and the lawyer's running for office or something. These, very interesting relationships, been a very interesting experience, but I would say probably eighty percent of our cases come from the problems in the probate court system, where still county-elected, partisan-elected probate judges are involved. And now the question of ethics, you see, in the terms of their conduct. Do they go to political meetings and all this sort of thing? So we've built up quite a little body in cooperation actually with other states doing the same thing of what I would refer to as the "A common law of judicial ethics". In other words, in law of course the practices of the past, the decisions of the past are what guide you in the future. So my experience still continues on the judicial council, I'm sorry, the judicial ethics commission, and that has been good.

Now, my contact with Senator Muskie was never really very much of a personal or direct one. He came to the University at one time and one of his children was here, and we managed to get him to speak to our political science majors in our seminar room. And that was, that was

certainly very, very good for them. A memory I have which stands out very, very pleasantly in my mind is our university commencement of 1980. Now, Ed Muskie was now Secretary of State, a very short time he'd been Secretary of State. One, either son or daughter, I don't know which now, was graduating in the commencement here in the spring of '80. He had gone to Europe on Air Force One for a high-level meeting and he landed in Bangor on his way back. I'm surely, I'm sure that was timed so that he could attend the commencement exercises. Then we had commencement exercises later and they were out of doors on our athletic field, and by chance the speaker at that commencement was the foreign minister of Canada, and there were certainly moments of pride here when we observed our Secretary of State, Muskie, and our neighbor the Canadian foreign minister sitting together on the stage here at the University of Maine.

When I came here the internship program with members of Congress had been going about a year. This was started by Gerald Grady, whose position I took here at Maine. So I continued helping place students in Congressional offices, in House and Senate offices within the Maine delegation for many years. And I discovered that, when I first was introduced to the responsibility, that Senator Muskie had then an intern in the office; there was never, never a question but that he had an intern every year that he was in the Senate. It was a fabulous experience that these youngsters had. And they would report when they came back, or in fact I was receiving bi-weekly reports from them in terms of what they were doing and what they were learning. He never for a moment hesitated to do this and it was a tremendous aid to many of these students whose lives I have followed since. Our other senator refused to take any intern, and never did at the time that she was there.

On one occasion he came I think, again either a son or a daughter here, and the president [of the University of Maine] asked a few of us to have lunch with him at his house. And that was a most pleasant occasion, the only occasion basically on a one-on-one relationship that I had with Senator Muskie.

How do I rate former senator, former secretary of state, former candidate for president, Edmund Muskie? Very, very highly to be sure. I would say that he, well others have said he had guts. He spoke up in a time when it was particularly needed in the philosophy of government that was really needed. He was an analytical thinker, a progressive to be sure; strong in character, strong in expression at times. But he was fitted, he fitted right in at the proper time with the progressive approach. A Liberal" you might call it, but at least governmentally progressive with balanced judgment in terms of what ought to be done. I think the state of Maine should be very proud, as it is, of the memory of Ed Muskie. He planted himself very quickly onto the national scene, of course, as a vice-presidential nominee and for his work in the Senate. So I have been very proud to say that I was a Mainer who wasn't all that close to him, but nevertheless did have contact. And from my voting record and from my class teaching and from other expressions, certainly gave him the recognition that he deserved. And I think it is very good that this is now being recorded and the Muskie Institute is a fact of life.

ALK: Thank you very much for your time.

End of Interview