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McAleney, Helen I. Twombly oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

Interview with Helen I. Twombly McAleney by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee
McAleney, Helen I. Twombly

Interviewer
L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date
March 16, 1999

Place
Portland, Maine

ID Number
MOH 071

Biographical Note

Helen I. Twombly was born on April 24, 1909 in Munroe, Maine. Her parents were Ethel [Lamson] and Guy Mark Twombly. Her father was a government employee. Her mother was an active Democrat who served on the Democratic State Committee. When Helen's mother died, her father retired and became active in the Maine Democratic Party, and was a key organizer of Waldo County. Helen attended the University of Maine at Orono for two years, and then worked for the government in the WPA. She also worked at North Yarmouth Academy before retiring. She married Bill McAleney in 1942, and remained an active Democrat. At the time of the interview, she lived in Portland, Maine.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussion of: Guy and Ethel Twombly; living on a farm; growing up in a political family; Waldo County in the 1920s-1930s; working at the WPA/OPS; caring for Bill McAleney in his later years; factions in the Democratic party; Waldo County politics; campaigning for Muskie; Eben Elwell; William R. Runnells scandal; Elwell's impact on Waldo County; religion in Munroe; changes in Waldo County over the years; recollections of the 1954 gubernatorial campaign; Muskie's qualities; and Phyllis Murphy.

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Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Helen McAleney at her home in Portland, Maine on March 16, 1999. Mrs. McAleney, could you please state your full name and spell it for me?

Helen McAleney: Yes, Helen I. Twombly McAleney, it's T-W-O-M-B-L-Y, the middle name, my maiden name.

AL: And where and when were you born?

HM: And McAleney is M-C-A, M-C-A.

AL: M-C-A.

HM: Yeah, L-E-N-E-Y.

AL: And where and when were you born?

HM: I was born in 1909, April 24.

AL: And where?

HM: And I was born in Monroe in Waldo county.

AL: What were your parents' names?

HM: Guy Mark Twombly and Ethel Lamson Twombly.

AL: How do you spell her middle name, Lamson?

HM: L-A-M-S-O-N.

AL: How many children were there in the family?

HM: Mine? Just my brother and myself.

AL: And were you older or younger?

HM: I was younger.

AL: And what were your parents' occupations?

HM: Well, my mother was the first Democrat and, the first woman to be secretary, not secretary, be treasurer and tax collector in the town. And it was shortly after women could vote.

AL: And your father?

HM: And my father went to law school, but he was sick in Boston, but he had to come home. He came home and he stayed on the farm, which belonged to my great grandfather. And he and Mama used to go to Socialist meetings in Waldoboro, and the way they did it was, Pa had a car, it was a Mitz car, and so he would take the car part way. And then they had a whole nest of a, of a, transportation in Maine at one time, you know. You could go from one place to the other, practically all over the place. And then when they got to, they got as far as Camden, then they'd make other transportation to Waldoboro. They'd stop the car once in a while and get on the train, you know. So they went to, they, Pa worked for the Democrats starting with Roosevelt. After he retired he could work because he had a government job, the mail driver. And he had, we grew apples and they had the big orchard and it was way away from the house, because then they didn't spray everything and if you had a good orchards at one time and the bugs ate up the apples, you know, but instead of replanting, well, you just moved the whole thing about four miles away. Because you owned land in those days. We owned about three farms. But, so with that and looking after my grandmother and grandfather and my mother's people and us, he had quite a lot to do. But he did whatever he could to earn a living. And people have done it in

Maine, they're still doing it in Maine.

But he didn't participate politically. Mama did. And she was state committeewoman, and he saw to it that she could go. And then after he retired, he supported the person that he thought he wanted to support, which was always a Democrat. And he didn't go to Arizona. He would stay home, and, didn't have money enough to take a trip to Arizona for the winter, and so then he would, he's the only person I ever knew that cared enough for his government to do that, and he stayed home in the winter. But then when they weren't running, why, he didn't have to save up his money so he'd go out to Arizona every winter. He liked that. He went to Mexico, and, you know. He did what he wanted to do. Move around, and he always wanted to find out what was ticking and, you know, he'd go out and talk with people.

But he never ran, he ran once for office, I can't remember, it was way, way, way back. Of course he didn't win, those were the days when Democrats didn't, weren't supposed to even bathe, you know, read a book or anything. And he had, we had all kinds of books in our house at home. And we could read anything we wanted to. Had Voltaire, we had all Balzac. The one that I liked to read the most was Eugene Sue[1], which was a forbidden book, you know, because it, well, it just was, that's all. It told the truth, you know.

And so when Pa, after Pa retired, my mother died shortly afterward and he worked harder in politics then. And he'd read The Republican Journal which was the paper in the little county, Waldo county, and he'd check out the obits, and he had a list of Democrats that were, and he also had a list of Republicans, which was the long list. It didn't take them very long to make the Democrats list. And so when one of them died, and about, as soon as he could, he'd go to that town and he'd say he wanted to look at their election list, and if the person was on it, he'd say, you have to take that off. And they'd say, why? And he'd say, because the person is dead, you can't vote, although they used to do that, you know. You've heard of that of course. Oh yes, they'd vote them dead or alive, they used to do that in Boston, you know, oh yeah, they voted. So Pa was making very sure, very sure that they didn't vote people after they died. He had enough Democrats, enough Republicans voting when they were alive, he said.

But they used to work, you know, they'd get the crowd out and . . . Then we had a camp, we lived in the woods at that time on the Canadian border, and we had the children, and we used to like to take them out of the woods, go down and see their grandfather, and we had a camp at the lake. And so we had all kinds of people and kids, and Pa would say, now, so-and-so is running, and we want to put a good showing, he's a Democrat and we're going to put on a good show. And we've got food and everything, so I want you people to get sobered off and dressed up and your kids and go because we need more warm bodies. So we'd always go, and we had a lot of Republican friends, too. We tried to convert them, you know. Well, we did a pretty good job when you stop and think of it.

AL: Were your parents religious?

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[1] Eugene Sue, 1804-1857, French novelist; his works in translation include: *The Mysteries of Paris*, and *The Wandering Jew*.

HM: Religious? That's a funny question.

AL: Well, were they, was religion . . .?

HM: They didn't belong to any organized religion, but as for being religious, I think they were. They believed in a higher power, if that answers your question.

AL: Yeah, I was just wondering . . .

HM: They weren't agnostics, they weren't atheist, but they were, they read all kinds of books on all kinds of different religions. We were brought up to believe that a person's religion was his own business and that, well, we had what they called, what did they used to call them? I wish I could think of the proper name. Anyway, they called them Holy Rollers, they were a sect, you know, around the country and Maine. And they used to believe in baptism in the rivers and the streams, and they had quite a little hoedown, you know, it was a big party. Well, Papa wouldn't let us go. He didn't go and Mama didn't go, and he said that was their party and their thing to do and their way of doing it and it was no one else's business, that was his idea, you know. So we couldn't go. But after we got to be eighteen, twenty, he said, now I think you can go, but you just don't say anything. He says, you just keep your face straight and you don't say anything, and don't make any comments when you leave or afterward. He says, if you want to do this, you can go. If you don't, better not try going because I'm going to hear about it.

AL: How do you feel your family affected the shaping of your attitudes as you grew up?

HM: How do I figure what?

AL: How do you feel that your family, the way that your family was and how you were brought up, affected your attitudes when you grew up, politically and socially?

HM: Well, quite a lot, because we lived on a farm that my great grandfather had, and my grandfather, and we had, we worked, you know. We had berries to pick, plums, cherries, name it, raspberries, strawberries. We had the nine yards, and we all worked, but come dinner at night, of course we had dinner at noon, we ate all the time and no one had any weight either because they were doing things, you know. But dinner at night, we sat around and talked, and we had to read the paper, we were taught to read. And we went to a little one-room school house, that's what there was in town, and we were taught to read, read the paper, and we listened to my grandfather and my mother and my father talk about politics and what was going on. So we got curious about it, you know. And Papa was always saying that it was your duty, your duty to learn about your government and, and to participate in it. And otherwise, he said, you can crab all you want to, but otherwise you shouldn't open your head, if you don't participate you can't say anything, or you shouldn't. But that was just his attitude, you know, so we were kind of brought up that way.

For instance, my brother is, oh gosh, he's a member of NOW and different things like that, always was, but he's kind of underground, you know. Papa was kind of underground. You

didn't, sometimes you didn't express everything that you thought if you wanted to work, you know. And I know people here in Portland that registered as Republicans, because if they didn't, they couldn't work in the stores, women, I'm talking about women. They couldn't work if they were registered Democrats so they registered, sorry, enrolled I should have said, they registered and enrolled as Democrats. They voted, as Republicans, and they voted Democrat all their lives.

AL: So people, you found, had to do that a lot during that time period?

HM: So, yeah, that was the way it was. But anyway, I guess we were allowed to read anything we wanted to and if we couldn't understand it we'd ask Pa, and if Pa couldn't understand it he said, well, when you go to school, you can ask somebody else, they might know. But he usually knew the answers. And he read enough Spanish, he, enough Spanish dictionary over and over to know some words enough so that when he went to Mexico, he could get along all right, could ask for food, ask for over night, ask questions. He was about eighty years old then, when he went over the Sierra Madres. He had a pretty good time and he was okay. He never had any money, but he had a good time. He always had plenty of food, and literature, and friends and music, and heat.

AL: And family.

HM: And a drink now and then. So, oh, they went to, they went to the Chica-, they went to Chicago when Mama was living, they went to Chicago to the, they always went to the national meetings to nominate, you know. And then after Mama died, why, Dad still went, you know. And people had to save up, when we were young, we had to save our money in order to go to the state convention, you know, because you had to have gas and you had to have an over night, you know, if you lived far enough away. You had to have different clothes than you wore around the farm, you know.

And I can remember my mother took me to the opera in Bangor. They used to have operas in Bangor, just, they'd have them in Portland. Then they'd have it in Bangor. They were all wonderful singers they ever had in this country. And she took me to the opera when I was eleven. And Papa didn't want to go because he was tone deaf. He didn't like music, and he went up and he did something else with my brother, and we went to the opera. And I never forgot, it was Carmen, I never forgot it. But we liked, we had music, we didn't have anything very great, but we had some music because we had one of those circular, a Victrola, you know, with a circular not a flat record. If I'm talking too much, just tell me to shut up.

AL: Oh, not at all. I was wondering, what were some of the other influences on you growing up, other than your parents, that affected you politically?

HM: Oh, we had friends that I think influenced me some. We had, there were people that, there was my aunt in Belfast, and when I went to high school down there she was awfully good to me. Her husband was a recorder at the state legislature, as I remember, and the woman I boarded . . .

AL: He was a what?

HM: What?

AL: He was a what?

HM: Clerk recorder. You know then, they'd take down everything everybody says. I know they still do, don't they? But of course it was more, it was harder in those days, I guess, you had to type about everything, you know. And, oh, when I boarded, I boarded with a woman named Mildred Rose and she was, you know, I lived with her, and she influenced me some. And, not anyone else particularly.

We had, well, we had friend that used to come up from, and stay down here in Portland some. And he'd get sick of that and then he'd come up and stay with us, he and his wife, and he did because he was a man who told stories about how they lived, you know, way back. And he was a man who was born in Freedom, Maine, and he got to, he went to Washington. He graduated from the, he graduated from the law school that's still, you know the name of the law school, don't you, down there? The one that everybody goes to. Well anyway, I thought you'd know it. I know it and I can't remember it (*unintelligible phrase*). Well, anyway, he established the postal savings department, and he was a corporation lawyer, not a trial lawyer, and Dad used to go down and see them. Mama went down to see them once in a while, but they always came to see us.

And, we had everybody come to see us. And I got kind of fed up one time, I was about twelve years old, I wrote letters to the guests and I said, we love to have you come, it's so much fun having you, but Mama isn't well. So maybe just this once you can skip summer. We had a wonderful summer, and everybody was writing at Christmas saying, dear Ethel, I hope you're better now. So finally she found out about it. Well, I said, are you mad, Ma? Well, she said, it was kind of underhanded. But, she said, we did have a good time didn't we?

AL: Now, where were you educated, what schools?

HM: Well, Belfast High School, I went to Monroe Grammar School, Belfast High School, and I went two years at the University of Maine, and then I stayed out and taught two years and my brother, so my brother could go to the university, and he was an engineer. Of course it was a big deal, you know, men had to be educated. But they, I taught, and I don't know how I could save any money but I did some. I'll never forget those two years.

AL: When you say you went to the University of Maine, what campus, Orono?

HM: Orono, oh yeah, they didn't have anything but that in those days, you know, yeah. And I liked that, I had a good time. You know, (*unintelligible phrase*), I had to study, but I mean, it was good and I remember some of the professors, and I remember Elizabeth Ring, and she was a friend of mine for years and years. She just died a couple of years ago. She couldn't have been more than, oh, she must have been about six years older than I.

AL: Was she involved with the Maine Historical Society?

HM: Yes, yes she was, and she was the one who wrote the book, had written, she's written several books about Maine, Elizabeth Ring, very interesting ones. And they're awfully interesting because she just seems to begin with one town here in Cumberland county, but she takes note of all of the men and women who left Maine and contributed in the government. There were congressmen, there were senators, there were governors from out, they became, after leaving Maine, all over the country. And I liked her a lot, we had a lot of fun. And after she had to go to a nursing home, I used to call her up because she said she was so bored, I couldn't get out to see her, but I'd call her and talk with her. I don't know, she had a lot of lovely, she must have had a lot of interesting books and letters and things. I don't know what became of them. She didn't have children. Maybe she gave them to one of the men around here who was very good at looking up history, you know.

But that's, I majored in history and art, but I took biology and, you know, you need to take something besides what you really wanted to take. But it took me, I went the two years, and then I went one summer, and then I went back a year and then I got my diploma, you know, because you could do it in those days.

AL: And you did some teaching?

HM: Oh yeah, I taught two years.

AL: Where?

HM: Hate to tell you, Bradford, Maine. It's up kind of north and I guess west of Bangor, north I guess, and west of Bangor.

AL: Beyond Old Town.

HM: Yeah, you go back, oh, it's way above Old Town, yeah. I can't remember the other towns up there. But that was hideous because, it was hard, because it was cold where you lived, and it was cold in the school house, and I finally got a fairly decent place to live, but the food wasn't what you call real great. Like, you'd make a great big pan of cake, you know, and it would last the whole week. Nothing was done every day or anything. This woman was making money and, there was a carpenter there, and another school teacher, two school, besides me, the three school teachers, the carpenter, and a doctor. And he used to, I was, I weighed about a hundred and twenty-five, and I had a sore throat, he used to paint my throat with iodine, never asked me a cent, and he would always give me his glass of milk at the table. Boy, I remember his name, I don't know what became of him, he was a good old guy. I don't' know, he was trying to straighten himself out I guess, or something, but he was a nice man.

AL: Now where and how did you meet your husband?

HM: I worked for the WPA, and see, Mr. Muskie is younger than I, because I'll be ninety in April, he's about eighty four isn't he, pretty near? See, so he was a lot younger than I. That's a lot younger, you know, when you're young, and he was in OPA which was after WPA. So I can remember when I went up to, when they dedicated his section at Bates. I was invited and Bill

and I went up, and I hadn't seen him for a long while, and I was going to speak to, I wanted to go, I went by him to speak to Jane and, because I always liked her so much and we always, you know, I just liked her so much. She's such a nice person. And, so as I went by he said, oh, hello Helen. Well, it surprised me so because I didn't think he knew who I was, you know. So I said, well, Ed, we did pretty well, didn't we, for, you know, a couple of OPA and WPA people. He said, oh, did you work in WPA, and I said yes. He said, how did you know I worked in OPA? And I said, well, I just knew it. You did didn't you? And he said, yes, he worked in Portland, you know. So that was, I got that job after I grad-, got my degree.

We worked in CWA and they had a historical, a kind of a research project, and I, historic, so I took that job because you know it was hard to get any kind of a job, and I liked that. And, you go around, I don't know whatever became of all the things that we got together, but I knew when WPA came after that, and we had a real records project, and, we tried to save our records, but they didn't want them. And what we did was to have, have people go around in places like Knox County, Waldo County, all over, you know. And you'd check with the library, and then you could check with the older people in town and see who had a diary, who had kept old letters, old papers. And you can get a lot of information, because they did-, if you went at it right, they didn't, they weren't affronted by the fact that you wanted to read the diary, you know. And so all you did was list it and send it in. Miss, then, Elizabeth Ring was head of that for awhile, and so we could send it in. We did that. And it was really, I worked mostly in Waldo and Knox counties, and a little bit in Sagadahoc, and it was very, very interesting. And I never was refused admittance, and I never was refused to look at anything that I asked to look at. But we didn't get paid very well.

And then when I got down in, I'll never forget that, we were down in, I was all alone, but you take whatever transportation you could get, and I was down in Tenants Harbor and they didn't send the check, so I didn't have any money. So I said, I'll scrub your house, I'll do whatever you want because I want money enough to get back out of here, and then I want to be able to call, I want to pay for a Portland call, to call up this character that's supposed to pay me and he doesn't pay me. I have to have what money they pay you. So, well that, she said you don't have to do that, and then I said, oh yes I do, because I want to earn the money, I want to have some money when I leave here and I'm not going to get it by calling him. I'm going to tell him where to send it in Rockland because I've got some people there, not relatives but I know where I can stay if I have to. So, okay, I did, I worked around there for about a week and then I thought by then they must have this money somewhere in Rockland, at the post office. But that was quite an adventure. But it was, I'll never forget how cold it was and how miserable it was in that school, and yet there were bright, there was some bright kids there and it was fun to try to teach them, you know. But you had to do everything, you know. You had to teach them, well, practically everything. You had to be Mother Theresa and everything else, you know.

AL: Now what year were you married?

HM: Was I married?

AL: What year?

HM: Oh, when WPA, I met my husband in 1936 and we were married in, don't tell him this, let me see, Mary was born in '45, we were married in '42. And he worked in the office in WPA and he worked in the accounting office part of it, and I was, by that time I had started out working in Augusta and worked with the school lunches and sewing projects in different counties that were out of Augusta. And then when Agnes Manter, who was a, she was a dean of women at Farmington, and she worked WPA, at a WPA, well she left. So Jim Abramson was the head of it up, and I can remember when he came up to the, came up to Augusta, and he interviewed me for the job. He wanted to know if I knew how to sew, and I said, "No, I don't." I said, "Is that all I have to do is know how to sew when I'm not going to sew?" And he says, "No," he said, "there's other things you have to do." So I says, "Fine, you tell me what they are and I'll tell you if I think I can do them."

Well, the hardest thing was going around and talking with Republican selectmen, you know. To think that you could do anything anyway as a woman, you know, and then to, you had to ask them for money, because we furnished the labor, paid the labor, and we got the material and the findings and the cloth and the patterns, but we asked them to furnish the equipment, the sewing machines and a warm place, a safe place, with a chance to go to the bathroom and to eat. And, well, you know, they thought it was going to cost them too much. I said, yes, it costs you too much. What do you think good it will do to have those women on welfare, did you ever kind of figure that one out, and did you ever figure what it will be like to have women that had never been out of the house and never could do anything but perhaps sew, and were really good at it, or really good at cooking, and needed the money. I said, "You won't get a woman here unless she's certified that she's the only one that can earn the living." So, well after a while you got it, so, you know, sometimes it was easy. I remember we had a wonderful, I had a wonderful mayor in Waterville who was a Democrat, oh, God, was he welcome. I loved that guy.

AL: What was his name?

HM: You had to ask me. I could tell you. Papa had him over to lunch after Mama died and Dad got out the silk, the china, the linen and liquor and everything else, they had a great time. Paul [Dundas?], I can't remember, you know. I can't remember, but somebody will remember that's reading this I'm sure. Because he was a Democrat, he was really a good mayor, too. I feel sorry I can't remember his name, but it was a long time ago.

AL: Was this in the late '40s, or . . .?

HM: Oh, no, see this is in about, oh, about '38, 36, 37, 38. I'm sorry I can't remember his name.

AL: That's okay.

HM: So he was an easy mark. See, he was good. And then in Portland was easy because they had a man here that, for whom they, Barron Center is named, Matthew Barron, and they still have the center and it's still operated beautifully. It is a very good place to go to, and they have to do something about the, they just let people go. If they want to go, why put them all kinds of stuff and keep them alive. They don't want to go, they don't want to be alive. Where they can't

be treated right. You don't probably have any idea how hard it is to get anybody to come in and help to keep your house clean.

AL: My grandparents have gone through that in the last year or two. My grandfather just passed away.

HM: Yeah, it's hard, yeah. And you know, I'll tell you a place which is a wonderful place to stay. Barron Center's good, I don't know where your home is or anything, or their home, but one that's very, very good is the one where my husband is, and it's Sedgewood, it's in Falmouth on Route, going up number one, on Falmouth, and he's been there for, been there for two years. And, see, he had cancer and several operations, and then he had shocks, and then it's just like wires, you know, in his head don't connect any more. He's looking right at me and he doesn't know who I am, and then fifteen minutes later I'll tell him about something we did or some trip we went on, do you remember that, yes, I do. But I'd say another time, he wouldn't remember me. He doesn't know, he mixes Mary and me up and he, his little grandchild, he, and do you realize it's the first grandchild he has, about time isn't it, for God's sake?

And so, he loves the kid and even though, when he was a baby, his first year, he'd go into his, go to his grandfather and his grandfather would pick him up and they'd kind of, he mumbles, he can't speak words, he's lost the ability to speak words, almost all, entirely, not entirely. We have a speech therapist but I don't know just what good it does. But I do know that when you come and see him and you put your hand on his arm like that, and after, he'll, after a while he remembers. And we have him come to dinner and he doesn't know where he is. Mike has him come. Mike will go in, that's my son, and he'll go in and take the kid, and Mary will go in and take, and Lee is just the sweetest person, she's Mike's wife, and now Mary will open the door and she'll say, go find Grampy, and he'll go right and find his grandfather and jump right up into his arms, and they talk a while, you know. Neither one of them has a word, now the kid knows words, you know, his vocabulary's marvelous now because we've always read to him, you know. And we play music to him, you know, and then play other stuff that goes with the music but I don't think it is. Anyway, it's a little thing, he's gone to everything. That kid's gone to wakes, he's gone to funerals, and he's gone to dinner parties, he's gone to everything under the sun, so he doesn't mind people, you know, so then he wasn't afraid to go see his grandfather.

And he takes this old man that's out there, and Mary says he used to be a physicist, and Mary goes out there so much when she's home that she knows who these people are, and sometimes she'll help, you know, when they're short. I'm telling you that is, so the kid will take this man in the wheelchair, he thinks it's wonderful, you know, and so he, Mary says, that's all right if you just take him around and around and around, because this man can't walk. Well, the kid will take him around and around and around, the man loves it. And not too fast, you know. He's real good at it. So he has a great time, and he's goes around sees loads of people, you know. Of course they love a kid and they love dogs. I said, I don't know which, we got to get a dog to go with the kid I guess, helps them out.

But Sedgewood is, the people there are wonderful. We go in any time, and Mary goes in the night, and Mike, lots of times Mike would go in after a meeting that he'd go to, he'd go in the night, check his father out, see if he's all right. And Mary goes in any time. Sometimes she goes

and eats with him, helps him, you know. And sometimes we take stuff for the help, I mean, they don't get paid anything like they should be paid. Because a person that's good, efficient and kind, you couldn't possibly pay them enough, you know. And they, he's clean, because I look him all over, and so does Mary, and we check his clothes, you know, and he goes, he loves the whirlpool and that's good, he gets a whirlpool three times a week, and he gets real good care. And we have a wonderful doctor that will go there to see him. And the nurses will call us, and they'll call the doctor and the doctor will come in, and then they'll call us and say what the doctor said if he has any trouble. So we're very lucky, I'm the luckiest old woman alive I guess.

AL: What is your husband's first name?

HM: William, yeah. He worked in customs, that was what he did.

AL: Did he also share your involvement in politics?

HM: No. He supported me in whatever I wanted to do. If I wanted to go, he let, he'd give me the money to go, or he'd go with me. But he never said anything much, because he couldn't, you know, there was a long while you couldn't even, if you were a government employee, you couldn't say anything, you know. You could go, and you can vote. Wasn't that nice of them? But you couldn't say anything, you know. But he'd always go with me, he's always supportive of me.

AL: Did your husband's job, when you got married, did his job take you away from the town where you grew up, or had you already moved away?

HM: Well, see, I'd been in Portland. I lived in Portland. I've really called Portland my home since 1935, really. But I've been somewhere else, different places, you know. We lived in Canada a couple of years, we lived up in the woods on the border, on the Canadian border. We had a great big house on the, that's why we had so much company I guess. We learned after a while, so we had a lot of company up there. We could fish, you know, on the St. Croix River, which is a border on Maine. And then, let's see, we went to Houlton, we didn't, we wouldn't stay in Houlton very long; didn't care too much for Houlton. It's a good town I guess, but.

AL: I think I'm going to turn the tape over and we'll start on the other side.

HM: All right, you do that, I'll go to the bathroom.

End of Side One
Side Two

AL: We are now on side B of the interview with Helen McAleney on March 16, 1999. Mrs. McAleney, if you could, describe for me what the Maine Democratic Party was like in the pre-Muskie era? I understand in the 1930s there were two factions of Democrats, can you tell me a little bit about that?

HM: Well, there are always factions, you know, and factions within factions, you know, and

you had to kind of spool it over once in a while, because each one wanted his thing done. They didn't have, it seemed to me from listening to, if I had to list-, I didn't participate, to listen to, when I was a kid, to listen to them when they came home from these pow-wows, that they didn't have any idea of politics, which always seemed to me was sort of the art of compromise, you know, you had to give and take a little or you wouldn't get anything. But anyhow, yes there was the Brann, Louis Brann, the governor, and he was at sword's points with Carl Moran the congressman. Of course you've heard this over and over and over probably. Well, they have, Don knows this, I mean, it seems kind of weird that I even talk about it because everybody knows it, but I mean, you know, you want it for history. So, let's see, and they were inclined to take sides depending on, see, whether they were from one county or the other. Like, of course, Moran . . . . Knox and Waldo and Sagadahoc were mostly Morans, you know . . .

AL: On the coast.

HM: On the coast, of course he was from Rockland, and he was a fairly good congressman as far as I ever knew. So, where he was a congressman, some people who were Democrats got to be postmasters, you know, which was a big thing in a little country town, or even in a little town like Waterville or Belfast. Democrats finally got an in, you know, that they could get a good job, you know, and then of course there's the, you hired people and all that sort of thing. I don't, I don't remember really an awful lot about why they had, it was just jealousy I suppose, and me first, you know, like it always is. They didn't want to compromise.

AL: No big particular issues that they were completely . . .?

HM: I can't seem to remember that there was anything that they really fought about except just, it kind of reminded me of a bridge club, you know. And you can tell I'm not a bridge player. Used to play poker, but I never learned to play bridge. Let's see, that went on, too, and it went on for quite a while it seems to me, for, that was a kind of foothold that some of the Democrats got a little bit of some of the things that they wanted. They'd play one against the other some, I think. But they had to watch the polls all the time, you know.

AL: I'd like to get your perspective on rural Waldo county politics.

HM: On what, dear?

AL: Rural Waldo county politics. And I guess from, maybe the best way to do it, if you could name some of the leaders in Waldo county politics starting with your father, and kind of describe them and what role they played?

HM: Well, they did, Mama used to do it before he did because, you know. He couldn't participate, but as soon as he retired, he retired very early, well he could do it. What he did was to, well, for instance, he made the list of the voters. He had a list of every Democratic voter, and he'd go, he'd contact him some time and see that he, urge him to vote, you know, and tell him why he wanted him to vote. That was part of his job, and he, another thing, too, he used to call people on the phone when they had a county meeting to remind them that there was a meeting, and then, you know, like, if it was Tuesday, the meeting would be Friday, then on Friday he'd

call again, see. Because they, to keep them interested, you know. And then if they had a pow-wow or a county meeting, why, the women would cook. They always had good food, you know, you made it, the food, you didn't get it out of a box or a can, you took it, you made it and you took it, you know.

And then if, you had your candidate came to the county, you had different towns that you wanted, where they were at least alive, breathing at least, you know, and could speak out loud, and there'd be at least four people there. You'd go around with your candidate and introduce him to the people. And then sometimes some town might have enough Democrats so that the town committee would put on a supper. That's the way to get people in Maine, or I guess anywhere else, either give them drinks or food, you know. You have them in your house forever. If you stop feeding them drinks and food, hey, you know who your real friends are. Well anyway, that's what they did.

And, that's what anybody did, the women in the towns, you know, they'd have little meetings and they'd try to get their friends, their friends weren't always Democrats, but the Democrats, they were friends with them, you know, they would get them to participate, to get out and get the vote out, and to, they couldn't pay people to, for, I don't know, I can't seem to remember when they started paying people some to pick up people and take them to vote. I don't know whether they do that now or not, I don't think they do, I don't know. No, because I know that . . .

AL: I don't think they do.

HM: I don't think they do because I know Bill worked awfully hard, my husband worked real hard for Muskie the last time that he ran as senator. And he used his car and he was gone pretty near every day, you know, and they'd go out around in the county, this county, and, Mary probably tell you about that because she had something to do with that, when. But that was what they'd do, that was what they called work, but it was fun because they were interested in this person that they were trying to get elected, you know. But . . .

AL: Can you think of any other people who were politically active from Waldo County that you could talk to me about?

HM: Yes, there was a man by the name of [Maynard] Dolloff, Dolloff, who lived in the western part of it and he was always willing to help. I particularly remember him. And, uh, well, I don't remember their names actually. I was away to school, you know, when I knew what was going on, but I could show you letters that Pa wrote when they, when they got the boat that took them to Vinalhaven, they got a new boat down there, and it's called the Margaret Chase Smith now, but it was called the Muskie because Muskie got the first one. There was a letter Papa wrote to me, it was awfully funny, and he went down on that boat, and I did have pictures of him and the senator. Of course, that was one thing that they used to do, to take people around when they, when a senator or anybody did anything, why they'd take them around, you know, go around with them, introduce them to more people. That was the big thing, introducing to people, you know, they didn't have, well, people sat around and talked more than they do now. Now they have their eyes glued right into the box most of the time and it's hard work to get anybody into a conversation, you know. They do something, I guess.

AL: How about Eben Elwell?

HM: Oh, Eben, oh lord.

AL: Could you tell me a little bit about him?

HM: Oh, Lord, Eben, yeah, he was a big character. Papa helped him a lot. Eben's very smart and very outgoing and very likeable, and he'll talk your ear off any time. You can call him right in the middle of the night and wake him up, and if you want to talk about politics, he'd talk with you. Or he'd talk to you. All you had to do was to mention a name. And, I saw him not long ago, maybe a couple years ago, and we, there were a lot of people there and we knew them all but we're the old people there. And so I started him, I wanted, nobody was saying anything to him, I went over to him and I said, let's talk politics. And see, we had the most fun, you know. Well, there's a big character in Maine, I don't know if you want to put this in or not, but, you can look it up in the newspaper and you can find stuff in the newspaper about it so I suppose it's all right for me to tell. We had a treasurer by the name of William R. Runnells, you ever hear of him? No? Did you know anything about him, you didn't know him personally?

AL: No, I just heard the name mentioned. I'd love to hear what . . . .

HM: Well, I didn't like him personally, because they changed the idea that, to write a project you had to write it all up, every cent was to be shown and what you were going to do and everything. Then you had to get an official, a local official to sign it, see. Well, then, the next thing in their great wisdom in Washington, D.C., you had to make a magnum project which would include all of them in the state, and you had to take that up for Mr. Runnells. Well, Mr. Runnells really needed to be cuffed, you know. And he, if he could take advantage of anyone, he would. But we got straightened right out right off, and then I convinced him that he could sign it and I would go. All I needed was his signature. I didn't need anything else, didn't want anything else, didn't come for any other reason than to have him sign it. And I would discuss why it would be a good idea for him to sign it, because if he didn't sign it, I would check it out with the senator and the congressman and some other people around in the state, mainly the head of the Department of Health and Welfare they called it then. And so then he signed it and I left, and I thought he needed to have his nose, you know, changed, the shape of his nose, but I shouldn't say that, anyway, so he, it seems that, I wish I could, you ask Eben about this because Eben can get it just as straight as a dart. You probably already interviewed Eben. You haven't interviewed him yet?

AL: We have.

HM: You have?

AL: We have.

HM: Well then he's told you all this. Didn't he tell you about William R. Runnells, did he forget that?

AL: He probably mentioned something.

HM: Maybe he didn't want to. I don't think that William R. has any parents or anything left, but anyway, they can cut it out if they don't want us to put it in. He's buried there in, you know on the, Gardiner, so you're coming south from Augusta, Gardiner's the first town, isn't it, and then Hallowell. Well it's in Gardiner, the cemetery, it's on the left hand side as you're coming south, big cemetery, right on the main drag if you're coming south. Well his, he had a stupendous monument for his grave, and I always get a hell of a belt out of it to tell you the truth. So anyway, he didn't tell you about the . . .

AL: I didn't interview him.

HM: Oh, you didn't do it.

AL: So I can't say for sure what specifically he said.

HM: Well, you better read Eben's because Eben is very smart, and he's, he's younger than I am, and it'll do you good to read it because he'd probably tell it better than I can. William R., he's really something. So I took Mary there one day, I said, "Mary, see that big monument there?" I said, "You want to go in, go around it. And while we're there I want to tell you a story about Mr. Runnells." But anyway, he had the bag, the money was taken from, I don't know how they did it this way, but they did. They had a cash, cold cash, in the State House, it was supposed to be taken care of by the treasurer. He was the treasurer, right. It was in a safe, and the State Police were supposed to guard it, you know, at least know it was in there, and it was the money that people put in for licensing their cars, and, quite a bit of a sum of money. Anyway, that disappeared. There was money in a briefcase and somebody shot him, and everything disappeared. And he had a ticket, they found a ticket, I think they found a ticket for Mexico, for an escape hatch, you know. Good place to go if you didn't mind the flies, I guess. But anyhow, anyhow, that's, he's the biggest character I ever heard of, you know. Oh boy, he's the biggest character we ever had in Maine, in politics. He put this, what is her name, named Petite or Petit, that's under the law now, you know. You'll see her name in the paper, she being on, she's finally going to be tried for, she's laying it all on somebody else, I mean, misuse of money. And so she's right up there with Runnells. But Runnells was a stinker, otherwise than being just a thief, you know what I mean? Just unbearable. I can't remember. I only wish Pa was here, he could tell me things about him that I don't want to tell, I don't remember them well enough to tell them. There he was, treasurer.

AL: So you say that Eben learned a lot from your father?

HM: Well, my father supported him and got him elected. He worked like a dog to get Eben elected. And Eben was smart and he did a good job.

AL: What sort of things did Eben do for Waldo county?

HM: Oh, it's been so long, I don't remember now. I think one thing, it seems to me, they got

the new bridge over Belfast. Of course we've got another new bridge now, you understand this was years ago when this stuff happened. And it seems to me it was the bridge, and it was about that time that they got the new bridge. Now they have another one, going over to Searsport, going across the bay. I remember, well, they had, the money, you know, for roads and previous to that most of the roads were, you could tell where the city . . . The governor always had a council, the governor's council, I don't think they have it any more, and, they disposed of that, but that was a real good club, you know. And you could always, if you were out in the woods someplace, or in a small town, you saw, ran across this wonderful road that went right in to the village and therefore made a main road, you know those governor council, one of the governor councilmen always lived there. See what I mean by politics? Okay, so they got a few decent roads in Waldo County, I remember that. And I don't remember anything else special, you know. You'd have to go to newspapers to find out.

AL: Now, you grew up in Monroe, and Eben grew up in Brooks.

HM: Brooks, and they're right near each other, next to each other.

AL: So was it really sort of a very familiar community, the two?

HM: Well, see, if you lived in Waldo County, you knew practically everybody. If you did anything outside your own place, joined anything at all, did anything for people or anything, . . .

AL: Can you give me a . . .

HM: . . . why, you knew practically everybody in the county, you know, and you read the paper. And in the paper in those days, they would say whoever was going here and going there, and, oh, you know, whose cat had kittens and everything else, you know. Very detailed information about people.

AL: Now Waldo county, then maybe you can give me a sense or an idea of what the make up was of that county. I know you've already said that it was very much Republican. But what was it like socially, religiously, ethnically? Was there . . .

HM: Well, they were, there were some Catholics there. And Papa, he was town manager after he retired for a while, and the Catholic Church burned, and I think it was out in Frankfurt, and this young man that Dad had befriended and he said, could they have a mass in the town hall. And Dad said, sure, why not? You're a citizen of the town. And anybody wants to can come to it, can't they, in a Catholic church if they want to, you know, so he said okay. Well he got a, you know, tanning for that. But they had the mass there, so there weren't too many Catholics in Waldo County. But there were quite a few in, there were some Irish, quite a few Irish in Belfast, and there were Irish kind of scattered around.

And there were Italians, too, because they came and worked in the quarries. That was another thing they did, they worked in the quarries. And I can remember when I was a little girl, a very small child, of Papa and Mama inviting the Italians who worked in the quarry to come to our house. And they didn't come enough so that I could learn the language or anything, but they did

come and Mama would help the women do things, and kind of help them, you know, and we had a good time with them. And so, but there were very few Italians. There were some. And there were some Jewish people in Belfast, and the rest of them were just plain Wasps, I guess, Yankees, you know. So I was a Huckamuck (*sounds like*), you know. Huckamuck Indians were a small bunch, but I, I don't have any Indian blood in me that I know of, but I've got everything else, like Russian and English and Irish and Scots and Welsh and French. So they seem all right to me.

Let's see, besides the quarry, there was shipping there, because the ships came in with coal, and they fished, so there was fishing, and there was agriculture. And then there was the big deal on hens, and Waldo county at one time was the, for its size, it produced more chickens and handled them than any other county in the country. And that was a big deal, hens. You can find the remnants of it now. But they used to be a big deal. I don't know what happened to it, because I don't seem to see them. I see remnants of where they used to be, but that's all.

AL: How has Waldo County changed over the years?

HM: Oh, it's changing an awful lot in the last, say, see, right now they've got that big credit card thing that's hiring a lot of people. And . . .

AL: You're referring to MBNA?

HM: Yes, I never can remember the initials for these things, they have initials for everything now. I try to learn them, but then I've given up on it. But that's it. That's a good new thing, and it was one of the poorest counties. It's a beautiful town, Belfast is a beautiful town, have you ever been in it? It's a beautiful town. But they managed to stay alive somehow, because they were the center for the, for people who lived on the outskirts who'd come in, you know, and they were the trade center. And then there was a, they had this big apple setup that I was telling you about, that my father got going, and he had this huge warehouse out in Winterport. And all around there they raised apples and they sent them to England, and they kept them in a warehouse, and they kept them just the right temperature in this warehouse for a while. And then they shipped them and they'd take them down to Searsport, see, and ship them off.

I was trying to think what else they did for a living. People raised their own garden, they always have that expression, raise your own garden, sleep with your own husband. They canned the foods, you know, some of the food. And they used to make, they used to make clothes for women and shirts for men and aprons and house dresses and house coats and shirts for boys out of, during the Depression, out of grain bags. And they got smart, or the people who made the grain bags, and they were made out of a coarse cotton, and they made prints, you know, pinks, blues, yellows, greens and so forth. And some people would use, everybody had aprons made out of them. Some people had skirts or shirts made out of them. So, the grain bags, that comes in with the whatever they used. They had cattle there so they could, I don't think anybody ever made much money that way. They raised their own stuff, you know.

Except Pa had purebred Cheviot sheep and he used to sell the, he used to have a list of the sheep and their pedigrees, and then he'd sell them for breeding purposes. But then the wool,

sometimes we'd, when we'd sheer them, he'd send the wool over to the agricultural department and they made nice blankets out of our wool. Oh, they were wonderful blankets. There were, but, some other people had flocks but not many. And they had beef cattle, Hereford cattle. And, oh yes, they sold, they had a creamery, in most of the little towns they'd have a creamery so that they could sell the milk, you know. I'm trying to think of the way people earned a living for you, that was what you wanted to know? Yeah? And then you had the usual number of lawyers in proportion to the people who worked, and you had doctors, and you had some . . .

AL: Now, I understand that your father was on the Maine State Democratic Committee in 1954?

HM: For a good many years he was.

AL: And, particularly in 1954, when Ed Muskie ran for governor and won, do you have any recollections of that campaign? Were you active at all?

HM: Oh yes.

AL: Could you tell me about that?

HM: Well, we had these suppers that you had to cook and get ready for, and you had meetings in your house, you know, and you had to, then you had to wash and iron everything in the house, you couldn't have anybody come in to it unless you did. And, and they were going and coming all the time. Telephone calls, you know, to keep track of people. It was just, it was work, it was fun, you know. And trying to get some, a meeting set up somewhere down on a lake that would be fun, you know, to go to, to have them meet the candidates.

And I remember one time specifically that we were all down to, down to the lake, Lake George in Liberty, and it was pretty good down there, you know, it was a, we always had a good camp. And we had a beach wagon, we came down from the woods with our kids and then Bill's brother would bring his kids and some of their friends and some of our kids' friends, and, well anyway, we stashed them away. And then we had this old man come we loved, Gilchrist from Belfast, and then that was just about all. And Papa and Phyllis, the woman that he lived with after my mother died and was good to him. She was a good politician, too, and she helped a lot. And we'd invite them to come down, you know. And we had, so we'd all get ready, wherever the meeting was, as I was telling you, and Pa'd have his list all made out and we would have to go. The kids didn't mind it because usually it was around a lake or something, they could go swimming, you know.

AL: Now, did you think that Muskie would win?

HM: Oh, of course we did. We were going to give it the good try, you know, and he was altogether different than any candidate we'd had before, because he was so bright. I don't mean the other people weren't bright, but I mean, he was very intelligent and he was a, well, he was kind of quiet in his way but he had a kind of a dry sense of humor, you know. And Jane, she was a real trooper. She always went, she had the kids, she'd go, sometimes she'd leave them, but she was always there. She was certainly a great help to him, and everybody liked Jane. She was a

nice person. I'll never forget how wonderful it was when he won, and they had a big, they had a party for, see, there are twenty-six [*sic*] [sixteen] counties, they had twenty-six [*sic*] [sixteen] parties in the State, in the Blaine House, and you know that place was just like a bog, and, you know, pretty much so until Jane got there. And she, I can remember one thing she did, she put down a beautiful gold carpet running up the stairs which gave that place a wonderful look of warmth and color, you know. Everything was dark in those days. And she was so nice. She stood, she was carrying the oldest child, whichever one that is, I can't remember, and I can see her now, she stood there for hours greeting these people, people that had never been in the Blaine House, they weren't allowed in. Well, they didn't have the face to go in, they weren't invited, you know. But now the Democrats could go, and boy, they went too. And they talked. And there was a Mrs. McLean whose husband was mayor who lived across the street, and she always went there, too. She has a beautiful house across the street, but they were Democrats from Bar Harbor. That kinda gave everybody a lift, you know.

AL: What do you think Ed Muskie's major qualities were?

HM: I think that his fairness, his logic, his fairness and his loyalty to his people. And I don't think he ever lost that. And I think he treated, like George Mitchell, I think he treated everybody like the, well, same. He treated everybody the same, I mean, with respect, you know. Of course he had a temper, I guess, but you know, that's all right, so what. Can't be perfect. You gotta air it once in a while.

AL: Do you remember any events or circumstances that illustrated his character or his abilities?

HM: Well, I think he illustrated it when he was in the Senate, the things he did for the country, the whole country, and therefore the state. Every time he worked on any kind of a bill that he was for, it was always, you know, right for the people, and I think he was, he did the best he could for the people in the state. He was a Senator for the state as well as for the country.

AL: What influences do you feel he had on Maine?

HM: On Maine? Well, he kind of put us on the map because of, you know, they ignored Maine entirely, you know. We just barely had meetings, you had to drag them out, you know, to get them to vote. And people just thought that it wasn't, you weren't really very nice if you were a Democrat, you know, you weren't really right socially too acceptable in many places. Of course we're not acceptable now, but we're more so than we used to be.

AL: Now you mentioned a few minutes ago Phyllis Murphy. She was involved politically.

HM: Yes, she worked from, let's see, from 19-, she worked right along, she worked from, Mama died in '41, she worked with him all the time. She was state committee woman for a long time, and she worked hard for, I remember one time when we, Bill and I came down with the kids and, to see Dad and somebody else who ran for governor, pardon me, I can't remember the name, can't, name a governor.

AL: Curtis?

HM: Curtis, yeah, yeah. See, you get, your mind doesn't always work very well. And so anyway, Curtis was running and nothing would do, we were down to camp as usual and so we went down with Pa and Phyllis, and we worked all the forenoon setting up tables and getting things ready, because he was coming up to speak. And then Pa had his list and I could telephone some, and Phyllis was usually doing a lot of cooking, and she'd get the flowers and stuff and Bill would put up, put them where she wanted to, you know. Phyllis was always the essence of perfection as far as being well groomed. She was one of these people that, she could go right out in a hurricane, you know, and every hair would be in place, and she was a nice person. She was very good to us, and she was good to my father. And they had this mutual interest, they went west together, you know. They traveled a lot together after my mother died, and they went to Mexico together, in fact. And . . .

AL: Was Phyllis also postmistress at one time?

HM: Not that I know of. Don't think she was. Ask Eben, Eben would know, he'd know all about that because he's from Brooks, she was from Brooks, see.

AL: I'll ask.

HM: I can't remember. I know at one time she ran, her husband died and she ran a restaurant with another woman and they had a wonderful restaurant. People came there from all over the place to go eat at that place, she was a great cook.

AL: Have your children followed your and your father's interest in politics?

HM: Mary has.

AL: Mary has?

HM: Yeah. Mike doesn't. He votes, but he's been very sick, and he, he was in the service and then he got out of Vietnam, and he worked in the Merchant Marine for a while, as long as he could, he was first mate on the tankers, and he was over in the Persian Gulf for a long while, too long. And so, he's, he wanted to get married and he got married and he has the baby and he's happy, and he's opened an oil business. He's very, very good at it, which is good. He's not going to starve to death so, that's all right, that's fine. But he's not too interested. He's got his own ideas, and . . .

AL: Have I missed anything important from your experience that you want others to know about you and your times?

HM: Oh, as I was kind of thinking about maybe WPA. We had, we had the only toy project in the country, and we had a housekeeping aid project, and we had art projects and record projects and the writers project. And the historical records project again, and they employ, and the music project and the theater project. And they put plays on at places like Pineland, you know, and music for people, and music in the parks, and they had the shell and everything. And so, they

did work, but there were people who had those skills that they could use. So we had something besides school lunches. And they fou-, the people in Aroostook kept account of the children after we had school lunches for them, and their grades all went up. They did that years ago, they said their grades were better after they had their lunch. And then we had surplus commodities, that was under my set up and they had all this material, you know, cloth and stuff, that the sponsors, we couldn't loosen from the sponsors, so, they really did a good job. That was Franklin Roosevelt. Of course they didn't, I mean, they weren't approved of either, you know. And the men did their thing, they had airports, roads and stuff like that, and . . .

AL: How long were you involved in the WPA?

HM: Well, let me see, Miss Manter left in '35 and I got through in '42 I think, and then I worked at NYA for a little bit and then I got done working.

AL: Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

HM: No, I just, can I look at this thing now? Do you want to turn that off so I can straighten this out?

AL: Sure, hold on. Well I guess that about does it. Thank you very much for your time.

HM: You're very welcome, you're very welcome.

End of Interview