

3-2-1999

Micoleau, Charlie oral history interview

Sarah Terwilliger

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Interview with Charlie Micoleau by Sarah Terwilliger

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Micoleau, Charlie

Interviewer

Terwilliger, Sarah

Date

March 2, 1999

Place

Lewiston, Maine

ID Number

MOH 067

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Biographical Note

Charlie Micoleau was born February 2, 1942 in Englewood, New Jersey. Micoleau attended Bowdoin College, graduating in 1963. He received a master's degree in International Relations from Johns Hopkins University in 1965, and got his JD from George Washington University in 1977. Micoleau worked in Maine for an anti-poverty program in 1965, and eventually worked his way into the Maine Democratic Party ranks. He was a scheduler for Senator Muskie's 1970 Campaign, and worked for Governor Ken Curtis. He was active in Democratic politics in the 1970s. He currently practices law in the firm of Curtis, Thaxter, Stevens, Broder, and Micoleau.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussion of: Micoleau's personal career; scheduling for Muskie's 1970 campaign; Muskie's relations with Maine in the 1970 election; commuting between Maine and Washington; the major political issues of 1970. The second part of the interview was inadvertently not recorded.

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Transcript

Charlie Micoleau: . . . concerns about the war. Here in Washington you had a bad habit of being, particularly in international studies, in being caught up in, with a lot of people that were actually involved with the conduct of the Vietnam conflict. And so then this, then there was the trauma of the assassination attempt in the midst of a civil rights movement of which my classmates were, some of my classmates were reactive. So you had everything from the Kennedy assassination to the Martin Luther King speech in that same time period. And so to answer your question finally, I got very interested in government to the point where I decided that my career did not lie overseas. And I came back to Maine and worked on the anti-poverty program, which was one of Lyndon Johnson's great society programs.

Sarah Terwilliger: So you came back to Maine, you started working on that, and then how did you get worked in to Ed Muskie's interests and working for him?

CM: I worked in, first in Washington county and Knox county, that's Rockland and Machias at, and then subsequently over a period of two or three years in most of that down east area,

Penobscot county and Hancock and Waldo. The program was a job training program. It brought me in touch with John Donovan who was a Muskie colleague. As a Bowdoin graduate, I also met and know, knew George Mitchell and Chip Stockford who worked with George, and Bob Shepherd who worked at the Muskie office at that time and, all three of them did, and Don Nicoll. Again, just sort of casual meetings, but the purpose of the program I was involved in, I became its, the program director. It was a hundred percent federally funded demonstration project as part of the anti-poverty program in those counties, but the objective was to sell it to the legislature and see if the legislature could not be convinced to continue this program on a full time basis, or a permanent basis. And that plus another individual I'll mention brought me in to the involvement in Augusta politics and the legislature, and I found that fascinating and spent quite a bit of time working on that.

The individual in question that at one point was very helpful as a mentor and advisor was Ed Pert, and Ed Pert is, you may know, is one of the early executive directors of the Maine Democratic Party when they had staff. Don Nicoll being, I believe, the first full time staff person for the Maine Democratic Party. And Ed Pert may have even followed Don, but if he didn't, he wasn't far behind. And Ed had been elected Secretary of the Senate during that mystical magical period of 1965 to 1966, when by quirk of fate, and poor choice by Republicans, the Democrats took over the Maine legislature, both branches, for the first time in, oh, I believe it was almost thirty years, thirty-five years. At that time the Secretary of the Senate was a part time job, so it ended when the session ended, and Ed had a contract to work in the Health and Welfare Department on a particular program and he and I shared an office together.

So I was working on my project, he was working on his project, and we traveled around the state a lot. And I began to hear these tales of the Democratic Party. And everywhere we went when we were out on the road, we -- I assure you in the evenings after government hours were over -- we would meet with the Democratic candidates and aspiring Democrats, and that was easy to do because there weren't that many of them. But that, I got exposed to, began to get involved with the Democratic Party that way. And of course, let's see, that was the period, sixty-four Ed Muskie was up for reelection, I was in Washington, D.C. in '64, not in Maine, but by the time we got back to '66, '65, '66, you had the counter revolution, the Democrats lost the '66 elections. And, but, you know, Margaret Chase Smith was up for reelection, Elmer Violette ran and Ed Muskie was very much on the scene. And Ken Curtis won a squeaker as governor in '66, and so by then I'd gotten exposed to politics and Ed Muskie and, you know, the time had come to start thinking about getting more directly involved.

ST: So how did you make that step to become more directly involved?

CM: A fellow named, how does this work now, sort of, Shep Lee would remember, a fellow named Shep Lee, I believe, no, I know what it was. Ed Pert got wind of the fact that the Maine Democratic Party was going to hire an individual and that person was going to be, solve a problem that the newly elected Ken Curtis had with the Maine legislature, which was they weren't enacting any of his programs. Not quite a mystery because it was a Republican legislature. But he believes that an effort should be made to staff the legislature, further that they needed help recruiting candidates for the legislature. And a happy coincidence of circumstances came together, which was, Ken Curtis had some excess campaign funds, George Mitchell was

Democrat-, newly elected Democratic state chair, and Shep Lee was charged with trying to raise some money for the party and to run the voter registration drive, or at least provide a vehicle to have a voter registration drive. The bottom line was, I, at Ed Pert's suggestion, applied for the job with, and Shep was involved somewhere in this, but I remember writing a letter to George Mitchell explaining why I, he should select me for that.

And whatever it contained was enough so that Shep, I think, recommended me, and others did, and I got the job to work as a full time legislative research director and then campaign director for the Democratic Party in this period of '67 I guess it was, '67, '68. It became quickly apparent that Ken Curtis' problem was not a failure of speeches for Democrats to, to be written for Democrats to give, he just didn't have the votes. And so we then began in '67 leading to '68 to recruit candidates. And so I traveled all over the state developing campaign techniques and themes and messages for candidates, and recruiting, etc., etc. And if you think about a six-year term in the United States Senate, Ed Muskie was coming up for, no this was later. We went through '68 campaigns, then it was the Humphrey-Muskie ticket, we all recall that.

In '69 the time had come for Ed Muskie to think about running for reelection in Maine, and that was a very important period. And having been away from the state for five years at that point, I shouldn't say away from the state, but having not stood for election since 1964, he lacked on his field staff anyone that had done as much traveling as I had done and so, again, George Mitchell recommended me. He was no longer state chair at that time. But, and Don Nicoll interviewed me and Ed Muskie hired me to work first in his Senate office and subsequently come back to Maine and work in that reelection campaign of 1970.

ST: So, how closely did you work with Muskie in the early part of your job there?

CM: Very closely because I drew the short straw. I had to deal with scheduling, so that meant that I had to go in and, armed with all these invitations and the persistent requests and all the endorsements by everybody who claimed to have been his roommate at college. And try to construct a travel schedule for him both in Maine and elsewhere. And so that brought me in more contact that I care to relate probably.

ST: Well, from some of the stories I've heard, schedule foul ups were among some of his . . .

CM: Well, there were none.

ST: . . . least favorite (*unintelligible word*).

CM: We would never admit to any.

ST: No, of course not.

CM: They were unanticipated consequences.

ST: Right. What was it like working for him?

CM: Well, you've got to put it in the context of that period of time.

ST: In the early part of, during the reelection, his campaign of 1969-70?

CM: If you think of the euphoria surrounding, the aura and euphoria, surrounding the Senator, or at least his friends. And the enthusiasm with which he was promoted as presidential candidate, coming out of the Humphrey-Muskie campaign, which brought for Ed Muskie that combination of a national platform in which he performed very well indeed, but also a cadre of friends and people that got some campaign skills at a national level. And a national campaign is totally different than any other kind of campaign. So, in any event, the period that I was involved, I was involved with the state committee and the Maine State Democratic Convention delegation in '68, and the Humphrey-Muskie campaign and all of that. But by the time you got in to '69 the principle objective was a serious exploration of the presidency, or presidential candidacy, in that '69-'70 period, coupled with a political need, a desire to do very well in Maine.

And the last thing that an aspiring presidential candidate needs is to have any hint that folks back home aren't satisfied with his job. Well, in Maine that became a sort of a ticklish issue because there was criticism that he'd gotten high falutin' and was traveling all over the country and he'd forgotten Maine. You know, it wasn't significant criticism but enough to get under his skin and make people nervous. If you think of this year, for example, don't ever suggest to Angus King that he wasn't in trouble. I mean, Angus was convinced of it, not . . . ah . . . that he had to work hard and in outstanding fact he had a ninety percent favorable job rating. But, so, in the context of the '69-'70 period, the mission was and the objective was to win big and win well and reaffirm the commitment to the state of Maine, while at the same time saying, "I'm not going to exclude the possibility of running for president." And so it had its own sort of tension built into the very nature of that campaign, and all the media attention that he was getting at that time.

So, your question was what was it like to work with him? He was, had a small staff relative to the big appetite of some of his supporters and advisors nationally, around the country. There were a lot of people that felt that he should run for president in 1972, which meant running right away. Whereas at the same time, until after, is my recollection, the '70 election campaign, there was no staff to do this with. So it was a combination of volunteers and piecing money together and, I must try to, somewhere in your archives it will indicate when and who the first employee was in the presidential campaign, which I have a, I can picture him but I, my recollection was it was sometime in 1970. We maybe even tied it in with campaign staff for the '70 reelection campaign.

So, on the one hand when Ed Muskie was in Maine he was a totally different person in so many respects. I mean, you could sort of feel the energy flow back and forth between him and the people of Maine, and all he needed was a couple of days of traveling around the state before he would slip into a totally different kind of a mode. So we had this Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde to deal. He was, you know, cantankerous at times when it came to the Maine campaign, I mean the situations and things you're talking about, scheduling and what not, but the toughest thing was this business of trying to be a Senator focused on reelection in Maine, and at the same time dash off to California to a fund raiser, or Texas or wherever it might be. And I'd be willing to bet if

you were to look at the schedule of 1970, it probably looked, as my recollection is that it was, very schizophrenic. And, so it was fun, it's exciting and at the same time you, we had the resources to put together a very good campaign for that era and did so. But the reality was that, you know, while he was extremely popular in the state, you never know until you crystallize into the campaign of that particular moment as to whether popularity can be translated in to a reelection on election day. So, it was a fun time. What time was it at that time when I, let's see, I was, oh, twenty-eight?

ST: Right. What was he like as a person, just in general? What were some of his . . . ?

CM: At that time? See, I didn't know him as a, as personally as I did later. And there still was very much, you know, I was in Washington for six months when this, and it was all, in a sense the Senate office was new to me. And I was dealing with this horrible particular issue of scheduling, where he tended to be grumpy in discussing it and resist efforts to try to bring some sort of organized plan to his schedule. Back in Maine, and then I went back to Maine in May, June, somewhere in that time frame, and then he was much easier to deal with. And we'd travel a little bit together and that made a big difference. But it still was sort of a, in some respects a more distant relation. Certainly far less personal than it became later on.

And then of course the '70 campaign, the highlight of that was the election eve speech and all that went in to that, and then that very dramatic moment when a speech by Ed Muskie that was put together, put together everywhere, but it was actually delivered in Cape Elizabeth, served as a wonderful counterpoint to this rather hysterical campaign eve midterm election speech of Nixon. And that sort of set the stage for the presidential campaign. So you, you know, you had all of that national pressure beginning to build, and then of course after the election it went of in to new heights of, in retrospect, fantasy and frenzy. But at, and then when I went back, I went back first on the campaign staff for a period of time. And then there were changes in staffing and then in 1971, I guess it would have been March sometime, and you would know from the records when people came on board. But Don went down to the campaign, John McEvoy came on as administrative assistant, and I came up from the campaign. He recruited me to come up from the campaign staff and we recreated the Senate, the old Senate office in a smaller version of it within a much larger nationally oriented, internationally oriented, staff. And so I became executive director, which is the position that George Mitchell had held, and, or executive assistant, and we had three or four people working in this little microcosm of Maine. And that was the beginning of a much more growing personal relationship with the Senator because of my responsibility to him. Which I think we both took pretty personally that, whatever happened that his relationship with Maine was, and the quality of his services to the Maine constituents would not suffer as a result.

ST: So what was your role like in that new position of the executive director?

CM: Executive assistant.

ST: Executive assistant.

CM: Everybody was an assistant, only one director. Well, first of all the people were

interesting. One of the people, the campaign staff was quite small, up in Waterville. George Mitchell came on full time at this, you know, took a leave of absence from his law firm for a few weeks. The senate staff like Don Nicoll and others came in and out, but a very peripherally, first because of the Senate rules but also because of the, peripherally in the time sense, not in terms of the substance of input in the campaign. But also there was this national thing going on. The staff itself included John Martin, I was going to say before he was speaker, but for all I know, no, he, it was before he was speaker because of course the Democrats didn't control the house. But he was in the legislature, so John Martin was the 1970 campaign treasurer. And then there were these young people that were sort of fresh out of school that were extremely helpful and eager and willing to work for peanuts. Including a guy named Tom Allen, and so I recruited Tom to come down and work with me in that Senate office staff in '71, so Tom, working with me were Tom Allen and Cyrus Vance's daughter, Elsie Vance, and two or three other interesting people at the time. But we had, so we put this little complex together within the Senate office, and it was focused primarily on Maine, service to Maine, and responsibility of course for the field office. Keep in mind, at that time, I'm not sure when it began to change, but I think we persisted well into '73 or '72, through '72, with only that original field office, or, it was the senator's law office originally in Waterville. So that was the only office there was in Maine, and that was part of, under my wing at the time. So it was a grand time.

ST: Sounds like it.

CM: Well, I came back to Maine every couple of weeks, so that was . . .

ST: What was it like commuting back and forth from Maine to Washington, how did you find that experience?

CM: Oh, I've lived in the airplane for twenty-five years so that, yeah. Somewhere in there it got very exciting because we got jets. I can still remember, I think it must have been like, it was late, it was like '65 maybe, somewhere in there they made such a big deal of, that's when Portland International Jetport got its name because Northeast Airlines flew a yellowbird 7-, whatever it was, 27, 37 from Portland for the first time, so we had jet service so it was not big deal, traveling wasn't a big deal. It was fun to go back and forth.

ST: Were you married at the time that you were doing all the commuting?

CM: Yes, I got married when I was up here in Augusta. Being single in Augusta in '65, '66, it's probably about as good as it would be now to be single in Augusta. And, in any event, I married and had, depending upon what year we're talking about, one or two children, or three. No, traveling was part of that job. I hadn't thought of that until you mentioned it, but at one point I counted up, in the '72 presidential campaign, between February, January and May, I was home eleven days.

ST: I just asked because my dad did a similar thing, traveling back and forth from Vermont to Washington and, for about a year and a half. So I was interested in . . .

CM: I was just with your dad Friday, is his name George?

ST: Yeah.

CM: Hah, I didn't make a connection of the . . .

ST: Oh, that's really funny.

CM: I was with him Friday in Washington at the, we can talk about this later, but, at something called the State Capitol Law Firm Group annual meeting, and he mentioned that he was an attorney in Vermont.

ST: Oh, that's funny.

CM: And he served under Bob Barr in, as deputy attorney general, and Bob was a classmate of mine at George Washington Law School.

ST: Oh, really, oh that's funny.

CM: In any event, I don't know what it was like for him. It was probably harder in a sense, it was really no big deal to go to Washington from Portland, but maybe it's just the city. But in any event, I, you know, young and foolish, and you get very And this is a great place to work, in the United States Senate and there's this great sense of camaraderie and spirit and what not and being responsible for Maine and planning the senator's visits back in Maine and, '71 we were trying to do two things at once. We were all involved with supporting the presidential campaign effort, and then you had this sort of added wrinkle again of trying to make sure that. As this increasingly national staff was trying to carve out positions and initiatives in, for Ed Muskie the candidate for president of the United States, we were still trying to keep the faith back home in Maine and it begins to get in to a very significant hallmark of Ed Muskie.

He had this wonderful memory and intellect, but it would play out in the politic-, in the context of what we're talking about, in that he always remembered what he had said to people, to the people, and so no matter what the issue was, you, as the media focus grew brighter, attention grew greater and greater nationally, he'd, if he were doing something back in Maine he'd say, now listen, just because these folks are suggesting we give a speech that says the price of gas was such and such, he'd remind us all, the speech writer who did it, the research staff and the folks in Maine that eighteen years ago back in Waterville, he was saying such and such. And he was a strong believer in accuracy, number one, but in a certain degree of consistency in his politics, and so that was a lot of fun to sort of thread the needle with, between again this responsibility for Maine and the excitement of a presidential campaign.

ST: We have time for another question. What were some of the, I guess, big issues that you worked on, or that stick out in your mind in Maine, some of the big things that came up that you had to deal with?

CM: Maine focus or what was going on at the time generally?

ST: Either or both.

CM: Well, it's, a lot of this is, I mean all of it is driven by what was going on at a given moment in time, so you almost have to pick year by year.

ST: Or maybe, in the 19-, in 1969-'70 in Maine is a good place to start.

CM: Sixty-nine, seventy, that's a campaign year.

ST: Right.

CM: I'm trying to remember the year of Kent State. Seventy-one or seventy?

ST: I'm not sure.

CM: Well that's important because that's when the students, the campuses blew up everywhere.

ST: I think it was in '71 but I'm not positive about that.

CM: Yeah, it was one of those two years and it put incredible pressure on all of us for a couple of reasons. We better find out that year, it makes a big difference whether it was before or after the campaign. I suspect it was '71, after the campaign, reelection campaign. So the reelection campaign, I must say, in 1970, nothing stands out in the way of burning, cutting issues except what I've described already, and so the challenge was just a winning campaign. It was a really funny, I mean literally funny, but also odd opponent, Neil Bishop who looked more like Abe Lincoln than Ed Muskie did.

Some say he looked more like Ed Muskie did. But he really was a very weak candidate politically, and so that made life a lot simpler and also cut down on any meaningful discussion of the issues. So the issues tended to be national and international, and Vietnam and extracting ourselves from Vietnam was very much on people's minds, and you also had, I mean the mid-term election campaign turned on inflation and this terrible economy we had. I mean, you were entering into a period of hyper-infl., we don't have hyper-inflation, but double-digit inflation. And my recollection, you sort of have to match this up with the events, but my recollection is that's when the Feds were really putting on the screws in terms of military policy and the great debate was on the fiscal policy, and unemployment. Inflation was beginning to wreak havoc on fixed income and low income people, and all that became sort of an issue. So there was that that went on, and then as you move into '71, then it became support for the presidential campaign and, and funny issues.

I mean, one that sticks out in my mind was, in Maine there was this tradition, there still is but very much so at the time, of the schools in Aroostook county going to school in August and then everybody got out of school in September to work in the, harvest the potatoes. And what sticks in my mind is there was this scathing criticism of Ed Muskie as a national candidate supporting child slavery in Maine. And my first, because of this, my first effort at crafting a response to this was for a Maine person very appropriately defensive, saying, "Who the hell are they to tell us if

we can't, you know, these kids like to go out and pick the potatoes. That's where they earn their money for the rest of the year for school clothes and what not." Well, you put that in writing and say, okay, now we're going to submit this to the *New Yorker Magazine* or something, and it was a real lesson in this contradiction of, between the new life we were all beginning lead in '71, '72 and being a national figure commenting from a national perspective, and trying to accommodate and reconcile that which is plain old Maine traditions and precedence and folks and the way we live life up here. And that played out time and time and time again, and labor unions, labor relations, the nature of the economy, how you approach government regulation and, that's something we can save for the next side of the tape.

End of Side One

End of Interview [Side Two was inadvertently not recorded]