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Interview with Dora Ann Mills by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Mills, Dora Ann

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

October 23, 2000

Place

Augusta, Maine

ID Number

MOH 216

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Biographical Note

Dora Ann Mills was born in 1960 and raised in Farmington, Maine. Her father, S. Peter Mills II, was a prominent figure in Maine politics and law, a state senator and then the state's U.S. attorney in the early 1970s. Her mother, Kay Mills, taught at Mt. Blue High School for many years. Her brothers, S. Peter III and Paul, and her sister, Janet Mills, are all attorneys in Maine as well as politically active. The Mills' family was very involved in state and national politics, and they knew Margaret Chase Smith well and met Edmund S. Muskie on several occasions. After graduating from high school, Mills went to Bowdoin College, and then on to medical school at the University of Vermont College of Medicine. She worked in a missionary hospital in East Africa for a year and then did her internship and residency at Children's Hospital in Los Angeles. In 1992, she moved back to Farmington and practiced pediatrics there while working towards her master's degree in public health. In 1996 she was appointed Maine's chief medical officer and the director of the Bureau of Health.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: education and career background; Farmington, Maine community; father's career; Margaret Chase Smith; Mills' career choices; family political and social views; impressions of Senator Muskie; and Colonel William "Bill" Lewis.

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Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Dr. Dora Ann Mills on October the 23rd, the year 2000, at her office at 157 Capitol Street in Augusta, Maine. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu. I think probably if we could start by you giving me your full name and where and when you were born.

Dora Ann Mills: My name is Dora Ann Mills. And I was born in Maine and was raised in Farmington, Maine.

AL: And what year?

DM: Nineteen sixty.

AL: And did you, were you educated in Farmington schools?

DM: Yes, nursery school through high school. I was in SAD 9 district, the school administrative district number 9, which is the Farmington schools, and graduated from Mt. Blue High School. And I went on to Bowdoin College and got my undergraduate degree from there in 1982. And then I went on to medical school at the University of Vermont, College of Medicine in Burlington, Vermont, graduated from there. And then went out to, actually went to East Africa for a year and did some work there in a missionary hospital. And then went to California for my residency, internship and residency at Children's Hospital Los Angeles in pediatrics. And then I worked out there, and that was three years, and then I worked out there for an additional two years at Children's Hospital Los Angeles from, this would have been now from, I was out there totally from 1987 until 1992.

And then in 1992 I moved back to Farmington, Maine, my home town, and practiced pediatrics there for four years. And during that time I commuted down to Harvard School of Public Health in Boston and obtained a master's of public health. And then in September of 1996 I was appointed to be the state's chief medical officer and the director of the Bureau of Health, which is the public health agency for the state. And I've had that job since then.

AL: Wow, busy.

DM: Resume in brief.

AL: Yes. Well, what was it like growing up in Farmington in the, you were born in 1960 and you lived there throughout your childhood.

DM: Yes, yes.

AL: What was that community like, maybe your recollections and your comparisons to other places you've lived?

DM: Well, it was a wonderful place to live. In fact, of course, it was so wonderful that I moved back there after doing a tour around in Africa and California and Vermont and other places, I decided to move back there in 1992 and I'm very glad I did. It was a, I grew up right in the center of town between the university and downtown, and it was just a great place to grow up. There was a strong sense of community. It was a very safe place. We were, I was the youngest of five children. We lived right in the middle of town, as I mentioned. And we played everywhere throughout the college campus and downtown. We played in the evenings and even after dark sometimes we were out there playing in somebody's backyard or an abandoned field playing softball and kickball.

And was a very safe and wonderful place to grow up, really. It was a good, strong community and people, most everybody knew each other on the street. And it was a small enough town back then in the 1960s and early '70s, that if you walked down the street and you ran into people, chances are you knew every single one of them. And that was a real strong feeling of community, and also you knew, chances are you knew the parents and the grandparents as well. So it was, I feel very fortunate that I grew up in a place where I had strong roots. My family has been there for, I'm ninth generation being in Farmington, and my son was born in Farmington and he's tenth generation Farmingtonian. So we're very proud of that history. And it gave us, it's given us a strong sense of roots there as well as tradition.

AL: Plus your father was quite prominent in the town when you were growing up. Did you have a sense of that?

DM: Everybody knew each other, so the fact that they knew my father didn't really stand out that much. The only difference was, is that he was, he was often, if I went to a community event he was often moderating or speaking at it, or he was on TV and the newspapers a lot. So, you know, I got the sense that even though everybody knew each other that somehow he was known a little more broadly than just from Farmington, or just Farmington people knowing him. He was, gosh, when I was born he was United States attorney, the federal attorney for Maine, and he held that job until I was somewhere in my toddler years. And then he came back to Farmington and practiced law, but was a state senator for, I think, when I was in first and second, third grade or so. In those years he was a state senator. So I used to go to the legislature with him a lot on school holidays.

My mother taught school in the school system in Farmington. She was a high school English teacher. But when the legislature was in session and we had the day off, he would often take me over to the legislature with him. And I enjoyed that a lot. And he would take me in to meet the

governor who at the time was, it was Governor Curtis, but. And we used to go to, you know, a lot of political events. He was a Republican, so we went to mostly Republican events at that time, but we went to public suppers and we used to campaign with him a lot.

And then in 1968 I think it was, he became the federal attorney again when Richard Nixon was, it's a presidential appointment. So when Richard Nixon was elected and Lyndon Johnson had decided not to run for reelection, my father regained his appointment as federal attorney. So he started commuting down to Portland again, and then he retired, I think, in 1979. And by that time I was in college. So, yeah, we got a sense.

And we, I knew a number of the politicians around the state through my dad. Margaret Chase Smith, Senator Smith used to come by our house fairly often, she, not, when she was in the area. Because she lived in Skowhegan when she was in Maine, and that's not very far from Farmington, so she would often drive over and stop by. And when, we had to go down about once or twice a year to Washington, D.C. for the U.S. Attorney's Conference and we always stayed at her house, and that was a lot of fun.

I remember staying at her house and she would get up in the morning and make us breakfast which I thought was really . . . Even at the time I could appreciate that U.S. senators don't usually get up in the morning and make people breakfast, or it seemed like that. So, so that was, I mean, we had very fond memories of staying with her down in Washington. And she would take us to the Capitol. I remember her taking me onto the senate floor, actually, one time and mentioning to me that people are not allowed on the senate floor unless you're a U.S. senator. So that was kind of a privilege to go in on the senate floor. And then sitting up in the balcony and watching her also. And she took us into the congressional cafeteria, I remember, several times, introduced us to a number of other congress people from around the country. So that was, those are some really fond memories I had.

And she always remembered our birthdays, that was, was also something I was very struck by. I have several of the birthday gifts she sent me from over the years, I still have them. I don't have all of them, but I have a coloring book she sent me one year of Washington, D.C. and it's signed by her. It's a beautiful big coloring book of Washington. And then she sent me some baby shoes when I was a baby, she sent me a silver spoon when I was born. And I have, I think I have, something else I have of hers, too, I can't . . . But she used to send me a birthday card and birthday present every year I was growing up, so that was quite memorable. She was that, she had a very excellent memory for, and stayed in touch with, people very much so.

AL: And that shows the closeness that she had to your family.

DM: Yes. Though I believe she was really close to a lot of families because she was single most of her adult years and never had her own children. And I think she adopted a number of families, like the Mills family, but I don't think we were that unusual. I think there were a number of families whom she adopted.

And I know my mom tells a very touching story that I've just, have always been really struck by. That during the war years, my dad was in the U.S. Navy for five years and was out to sea in the Pacific, and that Senator Smith would spend a lot of her evenings during the war years just calling women who were home whose husbands were in the war. And she would just call and

talk with them and say that she was thinking about them, and that my mother received a number of those calls. But also, a lot of my mother's friends received those calls as well, people whom Senator Smith didn't know as well. But she just had a listing of where the military people from Maine were and where their spouses, their wives were, and she would give them calls during, this is WWII, of course. So, that was quite, very striking. And quite a closeness I guess back then, you know. The population has doubled since then, so it's a little hard to keep that kind of closeness.

AL: Now, did you ever consider going into law? I know that your father and your sister and two of your brothers are all in the legal field. Is that something you ever considered. Or what took you in a different direction?

DM: I did consider it. I mean, I always had a, certainly a fondness for law because I grew up with it. And certainly kitchen table conversations always were centered around politics and law in particular. But it was, I was much more drawn to, I was much more drawn to science for one thing. I did very well in science, I was, did very well in high school in science. And I didn't, I shied away from medicine at first, because I didn't know any woman doctors. And I was, grew up in an area when if you were interested in medicine and you were a woman, you usually went into nursing. And nursing never really appealed to me that much.

But when I was at Bowdoin College I had a lot of encouragement from a couple of different professors, particularly Professor [James M.] Moulton, who was the head of the biology department there for a number of years. And I had taken some science classes, had not declared myself a science major, was actually majoring in Russian. Because I thought if you took a language, I mean, if you weren't sure what you were going to do with your life, and you at least majored in a language, you could always have a job. You know, if you knew a language well enough you could always get a job.

But I was, had taken several science courses and math classes and calculus classes and had done extremely well in them. And this professor had, took me aside and he said, you know, you ought, you really ought to think about going to medical school. Well, it's the first time I'd ever been encouraged to do so and yet it made all the sense. It fit into my wanting a job where I was working one-on-one with people and could work anywhere, because I like to travel, and so I could work in this country or other countries. It just seemed like a noble profession but also, you know, put together the science, I wanted something that was intellectually very stimulating as well, but was also very people oriented. And to me, medicine fit more that criteria than law did. So I anyway subsequently thought more seriously about it, and then went on to medical school after Bowdoin, so that was, you know. But it's a little bit different, so I call myself the black sheep of the family, the white sheep of the family, the white sheep of the family, not the black sheep.

AL: Well what, politically speaking, what sort of ideas did you grow up with? I know that there's some division between Republicans and Democrats in your family, although all, I think, very moderate and towards the center.

DM: I think, I grew up, I mean my dad was always very much of an advocate, an activist really, for the underdog. And so he, I mean, he's a Republican, but I think even he would admit, of course he's eighty-nine years old now and he's not doing well mentally. So he's lost a lot of

his memory and his ability to talk, but, because he had a number of strokes and things, but I think even he would admit now that he was a, he's been a Republican because he was born into the Republican Party. I mean, he comes from an age, he was born in 1911, you know, and you were, at that time you were sort of born into a party.

And we were, I mean I was registered as a Republican when I was eighteen because I, I remember thinking about the possibility of registering as a Democrat and knew that if I did, my father would be extremely angry about that, that that would really bother him a great deal. So I stayed a Republican for several years. But I also knew that this same type of activism, particularly for the underdog, and standing up against corporations My dad did a lot of work, for instance, in the 1960s where he stood up against the paper companies and wasn't afraid to do so. And that type of, that type of activism we really, I think we all learned from him. But I associated that much more so with the Democratic Party than the Republican Party, particularly as I became an adult and started listening to the ideology of both parties.

And then when Reagan came into office in 1980 it really confirmed my beliefs more in the Democratic Party. So I believe I changed over probably in the mid-eighties, 1984 or so. So, yeah, there is a division but I think we are all very moderate. We're, in terms of, I think we're fairly fiscally moderate, socially very much more liberal, I mean we're all pro-choice, for instance. And, yeah, my sister's probably the most liberal I'm sure, my sister Janet, she would say that too. She's by far the most liberal. But we agree on a lot, even though most of the guys in the family are Republicans and most of the women are Democrats. My mother's now a registered Democrat, but she, but I think we agree on more things than we disagree on.

So we really have a base of, I believe with, of using, making sure that I mean, one of the things that my parents both really instilled in us was the fact that, you know, we did have a lot of advantages that others and our neighbors did not necessarily have. We had more opportunities for education, my parents instilled in us the value of education. But we were also very much made aware of the fact that we were given more opportunities for education than a lot of other people were, had some more materialistically. We weren't wealthy by any means, but I think we were very much made aware that there were a lot of people who did not have as many opportunities as we had. So we were brought up with, instilled with this value that because you have more you need to fight for those who don't have as much. And we were really, instilled in us a lot of that type of activism that my, my parents both have I think really implemented in their own lives.

So to me that kind of activism resonated more with the Democratic Party. But my brother Peter, that resonates more with the Republican Party and that's fine. He does a great job as an activist for the Republican Party, so. I think some of them wish he was with the Democrats.

AL: Oh, that's great. Now your mother was a teacher at Mt. Blue High School. Did she, what sort of, I'm not sure what I'm trying to ask, did she have an influence on your education as far as really keeping you focused, or is it -?

DM: They, both my parents were very influential in making sure that we took advantage of every educational opportunity we could. They both had gone to, had graduated from college, from Colby College, and from graduate school. My mother has a master's in English and my dad went to law school. And all four of their parents also had finished high school and at least

some college or a technical college of some sort, and it had different names for it back then, but they also had post secondary school grad degrees. And so I think they, the value of education was very much instilled in us.

And my mother, you know, of course being a school teacher, was right there helping us when we were growing up. Not helping us do our homework but just, she, dinner conversation was very often, you know, what did, from my mother was, 'what did you learn in school today?' And she was truly very interested in what we learned at school today, you know. And she would ask us a lot of follow up questions and kind of got us to reteach the class that we had just been taught, you know. And that was a good, it was a very excellent method. I think she did it very intentionally to not just learn what we were learning in school, but also she knew if we could teach back to her what we had learned, we learned it again. So there are things like that she did that were just integrated into our daily lives that just, I think, helped us all to excel in education and to take advantage of educational opportunities.

AL: Now were there any teachers you had that, well let's say lived up to your mother as far as teaching? Some people that, any teachers in particular that influenced you?

DM: In Farmington?

AL: Um-hmm.

DM: Oh yeah, well Mr. Violet, Larry Violet, absolutely. He was a history teacher at the time I was in high school and he taught British history and Civil War history and, those are at least two of the course I took from him, and he was fabulous. He instilled a lot of curiosity and a lot of energy. And he was a very difficult teacher to get a good grade from, but you wanted to work hard for him and I liked that.

AL: And why don't we move on and talk a little bit about the times that you did encounter Senator Muskie, and what your impressions were of him.

DM: Well I met him several times, mostly as a child when I was with my dad. I met him either at different political events or at the State House. I mean, I just have some vague memories of meeting him when I was a child. And, of course, I was very struck because he was very tall. So I was, as a child I was, the thing I remember the most was he was a man of great stature, not only figuratively in terms of what he accomplished in his lifetime but also in terms of his literal stature.

I do remember meeting him some as a young adult. I met him on a plane one time actually. And I can't remember where I was flying to or from and, but he was on the plane and I went up to him and introduced myself and talked with him. And he was just, he was most friendly. He asked me about my family, because I knew he didn't know me but I was probably in college or probably in medical school or someplace and he, but he, you know, asked me all about different family members and knew my sister Janet and my father and my brother Peter, and asked all about them.

The last I remember meeting him was at Bowdoin College for, I believe it was their two hundredth anniversary which would have been 1994. And they had a big celebration on their

two hundredth anniversary and of course Senator Muskie was there, Secretary Muskie I guess we'd call him. Secretary Muskie was there because, him being an alum. He was an alum of Bowdoin, wasn't he?

AL: Actually Bates.

DM: At Bates, that's right, I was just thinking of that. But why would he have been at Bowdoin then?

AL: But he could have been at Bowdoin.

DM: He was at Bowdoin, I know he was at Bowdoin and I, I just realized when I was saying that that no, he wasn't a Bowdoin grad, it was Bates. Well he was at, he was at Bowdoin for a big celebration, and I think it was the two hundredth anniversary but it might have been something else. But anyway, I did, you know, go up and introduce myself. And he was, again he was just very friendly and very solicitous about my different family members and asked about them, and it was just a pleasant but short encounter.

AL: Now you're the youngest child in the family. Do you have recollections of when Senator Smith would be around, I'm trying to remember his name, the man who was her assistant.

DM: Yeah, and I was trying to remember his name, too, when I was talking about her.

AL: Colonel.

DM: Colonel somebody, it was, yeah.

AL: Well I, we know who we're talking about. But do you remember, was he around a lot with her when you would see -?

DM: Yeah, I remember that. I remember knowing that she had this extremely close friendship with this person, I'm just blanking out his name. And then I remember going down to her house on the coast for instance. She had a house in, somewhere near Georgetown or someplace, someplace down on the coast, and his house was right next door. And then, and I remember going over to his house for some reason and knowing that they were next to each other. And then I remember down in, I think her house in Washington, D.C. was actually in Bethesda, Maryland. But also his house was, I can't remember exactly, it was either right next door or right in back of her house or something like that. It was very, very close proximity.

So, you know, I remember asking my parents, well, you know, "Are they married or are they thinking about getting married?" Or, you know, as a child would do and just being given some evasive answer like, "No," that, you know, "he is her assistant," and that, you know, they're very, very close. But, you know, he really works for her but as her assistant, and he also lives near her so he can provide her assistance all the time. I don't remember him very much, I just, I remember meeting him and I remember him being at the dinner table actually at our house. But I don't remember much that he, you know, conversation with him, it was mostly centered on her. I think he deferred to her a lot, I got that impression at least. I don't remember him talking much, but I remember her talking.

AL: And now the job that you have now, tell me a little bit about that.

DM: Well I, as I've been saying, direct the Bureau of Health which is the public health agency for the state. And I serve as the chief medical officer or health officer for the state of Maine. And I'm a political appointee by Governor King and the commissioner of Department of Human Services, whom at this time is Kevin Concannon. It's been a wonderful four years, I mean I, this has been really a perfect job for me. I've just loved it because I've used, integrated really, my knowledge of Maine which having grown up in Farmington, but also having family members spread out around the state. My mother's from Ashland, Maine up in the northern part of the state originally, and my dad's father was originally from Deer Isle in Stonington. So as a child we traveled a lot around the state and, of course, because of political events, too, we would often be on the road traveling to different political occasions.

So integrating my knowledge of the state, plus my knowledge of medicine and health, plus knowledge of public health from the degree in public health. And my knowledge of practicing medicine health in Maine, having practiced in Farmington for four years before taking this job, you know, kind of gives me an idea of what medicine is like on the front lines of Maine. And also integrating my knowledge of politics, having grown up in a political family, has been really helpful to this job because I'm used to having some knowledge about how politicians, how policymakers think. And it's helped me to be able to take my knowledge of health and health data in Maine and the knowledge that the Bureau of Health staff bring to me and translating that into a story for politicians, for the governor, for our legislators, and for the public. I mean, I feel like one of the major points of my job is as a translator, to take knowledge that's either brought to me or knowledge that I have and translate that, so that people have a better idea of what are the health issues that we face in Maine and how can we address those.

And so that's one of the major foci of my job the last four years has been to improve the health status of Maine people by communicating to them what are the health issues, but also communicating to policy makers so that, the legislature particularly, so we can get more resources to prevention in the state. So it's been, it's been a wonderful four years because this really has, seems to have integrated a lot of what my background . . . My previous jobs, you know, just merely focused on medicine, primarily on just medicine and didn't really let me use some of the other parts of my background such as knowledge about Maine and Maine landscape and people, as well as some knowledge about politics and things like that. So it's been a, I've felt extremely privileged to have this job. This has been really a dream job to be able to serve the people of Maine in this way. And also that activism that my dad and mom instilled in us has come in very handy. We've had tremendous challenges from the tobacco industry. And it's, hasn't, it's been very easy for me to stand up against the tobacco industry and not feel intimidated because I saw my dad do that kind of activism my whole life, and other members of my family. So it's helped, it's helped a lot in this job.

AL: Thank you very much. Is there anything else you'd like to add that I haven't touched upon?

DM: I think that's, that's about it, no. Of course, working for an independent governor has been very helpful because where I come from a Republican background but am a registered Democrat it's been particularly, very useful to be able to, to balance both respectives. But no,

it's been, I've been very, very privileged to be able to have this job and serve the people of Maine in this way, so it's been a great four years. But, and certainly Ed Muskie has given us a lot of role modeling for that, you know. His activism and his leadership we still feel today and that his legacy continues with us, and has given us his modeling for leadership, I think, is one that many of us continue to use to this day, even those of us who did not know him real well.

AL: Great, thank you very much.

DM: Thank you very much.

End of Interview