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Mills, S. Peter III oral history interview

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Interview with S. Peter Mills, III by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Mills, S. Peter, III

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

May 30, 2000

Place

Skowhegan, Maine

ID Number

MOH 192

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Biographical Note

Sumner Peter Mills, III was born on June 3, 1943 in Farmington, Maine, to Katherine “Kay” and S. Peter Mills, II. Peter lived in Farmington until the age of ten when his family moved to Gorham to be closer to his father’s job, as U.S. Attorney in Portland. He graduated from Gorham High School in 1961, and went on to Harvard, and then Harvard Law School. To go to Harvard, he passed on an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy by Senator Margaret Chase Smith. His family was close to Senator Margaret Chase Smith. Peter is a member of the law firm Wright & Mills of Skowhegan, Maine. In 1994, he ran a successful race for State Senate, and at the time of the interview (2000) he was serving his third term. In 2006 he ran in the Republican primary for governor, losing to Chandler Woodcock.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Peter Mills, II; Janet Mills; Maine Republican party in the 1950s; Margaret Chase Smith; 1952 presidential election; Dwight Eisenhower; Peter Mills, II as U.S. Attorney; Bill Lewis; Smith’s lack of formal education; Mills family education; Smith’s style of legislating; McCarthy and the Declaration of Conscience; Smith in her later years; the rise of the Maine Democratic party and Ed Muskie; physical appearance effecting one’s viability as a candidate; Fred Payne and the appointment of Ed Gignoux to the U.S. Court; Muskie as an

originator of legislation; and Clyde Smith.

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Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with S. Peter Mills, III on May the 30th, the year 2000 at 10:00 A.M. in Skowhegan, Maine at his law office of Wright & Mills. I'd like to start just by asking you to say your full name and spelling it for the record.

S. Peter Mills, III: Yes, it's actually Sumner Peter Mills and I am the third, I was named after my father who was in turn named after his father. The name Sumner, if you're interested, comes from, arises from the death of the famous U.S. Senator Charles Sumner from Massachusetts in 1874. He was an abolitionist and a founder of the Republican Party. My grandfather [Sumner Peter Mills, I] was born in 1872, and he was two years old when Charles Sumner died and that made such an impression on my great grandparents that they changed the birth certificate and renamed him. I think he had originally been named Peter Butler Mills and, they changed his name to Sumner. And he was known as Sumner throughout his life. My father, [Sumner Peter Mills, II] to distinguish my father, he was known as Peter, and when I came along, I was Peter as well. There have been efforts made at various stages to shift me back to a Sumner in order to avoid the confusion, but I thought better of that and stuck with Peter pretty much.

AL: And where and when were you born?

PM: In Farmington on June 3, 1943 in the middle of the war.

AL: And you grew up in Farmington?

PM: Until I was only ten. I had newspaper routes there and so forth, and my dad was appointed U.S. attorney at the beginning of the Eisenhower administration in 1952. He at first started to commute from Farmington to Portland, almost on a daily basis. And my mother [Katherine Mills] prevailed on him to buy a house in Gorham. The family moved down in the, I think in the summer of '53 probably, and I stayed back with my grandparents for some period of time and finally at my mother's insistence I went down as a member of the... I was in the fifth grade at the time. But I spent the rest of my life growing up in Gorham; that is I graduated from Gorham High School at the age of eighteen. At that point it was 1961; my father's appointment as a U.S. attorney had ended, there was a change in administration, Kennedy was in office and a new U.S. attorney was, a Democrat would have to be appointed. And, but at that point I had graduated from high school so I went off to Harvard. My family in the meantime, the rest of them, my four younger siblings and my parents moved back to Farmington, at that point. So I didn't have as many connections with Farmington as my younger siblings do. Mine sort of terminated at the age of ten in most respects.

AL: Do you think that was some reason why you came to establish a law firm in Skowhegan rather than settling in Farmington?

PM: Well, it probably had something to do with establishing one in Portland in '73. I, that is, I joined one. I didn't establish one but I joined a small trial firm in Portland that became a fairly large trial firm during the time I was there. And I came, and my brother [Paul Mills] in the meantime graduated from law school in the late seventies and went back to rejoin my father. I was very happy trying cases in Portland and simply, and not going back to a small town at that juncture.

In 1982 my present partner, who is now semi retired, Carl Wright, had gotten to know me because I had been in cases against him in this region of central Maine and traveled up from Portland to manage those cases. He became ill of diabetes, and needed someone to take over his practice and made that proposal to me in March of '82. And I came here in the summer of '82 and bought the firm a year later, and have been here ever since. I just never got back to Farmington. I was glad to be somewhat closer, but my attachments to Farmington had never been as strong as those of my brother and, both of my brothers [Paul and David] and both of my sisters [Janet and Dora Ann] who sort of grew up there.

AL: And Janet, when did she become involved in the firm?

PM: Janet. Many things happened in 1994. I saw an opportunity to run for the state senate because it was an open seat in a new district, newly defined. No one had ever run from this central Somerset County district before. It was created by the decennial redistricting process and it suited me to a 'T'. It happened to conform to an area that I had practiced law in for ten years and so I, twelve years actually, and so I wanted to run. And Janet that same year ran in the Democratic primary for congress, having been for eighteen years a district attorney in Lewiston. She was responsible for three counties, Androscoggin, Oxford and Franklin counties. And she'd had eighteen years of it and I think was ready to move on to something else. She ran in the Democratic primary and lost, and then in the fall of 1994 she ran for the office of attorney general with some good expectation of winning, and came very close to winning, and was defeated by [Andrew] "Drew" Ketterer. A race that was principally among her fellow Democrats in the house and senate. So in December of '94 when I had won my, when I had gotten into the state senate and she had, was just recovering from two campaigns that were not successful I asked her if she wanted to practice law here in private practice and she agreed. So in January of '95, she came here and I got sworn in as a state senator and began doing odd things in Augusta. So that's the story of that transition.

AL: Now, your time in Farmington, you lived there until you were ten?

PM: Yes.

AL: Were there memories of Margaret Chase Smith? What was her role in your family?

PM: Well she was very, both my grandfather Sumner and my father Peter had been early and very loyal supporters of Margaret Smith. I don't know much about my grandfather's early affiliation with her, but it was clear to me that he had, he was fond of her, and that he had supported her in the 1940s when she was first in office. And I'm sure that was true of my father

as well, though my father was at war from 1941 through at least the summer. I think the fall of 1945 he came home. So, I can remember in 1948 when I was five years old campaigning with Senator Smith, I think that was the first time she ran for the U.S. senate. I think she had been in the house until then. And my dad would take her around Franklin County in an old car, an old coupe that we had. And I can remember quite fondly that Senator, she wasn't senator at that time, I think she was representative, congressman Smith, would permit me to sit up front because in the back the windows were so small in a coupe that you couldn't see anything if you were five years old, so she sat in the back and let me sit up front. And I can remember going, I just have fleeting images, or memories, of going places both with her and my dad and with my mother quite commonly as well. She was a very gracious, very outgoing campaigner, a very lovely woman. Those are my earliest memories of her.

AL: And you knew her in later years as well.

PM: I kept, my family was always in contact with her, I mean my dad was nominated by her in 1952 because of my dad's activities in support of President Eisenhower, very early support for President Eisenhower. I think before anyone knew whether Ike was a Republican or a Democrat, I think my father was very hopeful that Ike would declare as a Republican. The other two contenders in 1952 I think were Robert Taft who was regarded as the stalwart of the right wing of the party and Tom Dewey who had twice before run, and I can remember quite vividly my parents leaving Farmington in our new 1951 Oldsmobile and driving west to Chicago for the convention that summer. And returning with stories about Everett Dirksen's great speech against Tom Dewey. At some point as he was giving his oration, Dewey appeared in the hall, and there was a great buzz and a great lot of attention being paid to him and he, Dirksen paused in his oration and pointed at him with a long crooked finger and said, "and twice before you have led us down to defeat." And according to my mother, and according to press accounts at the time the convention was quite stirred by that remark, and eventually Eisenhower came out of it as the nominee.

And I think, I have to believe that Senator Smith felt very strongly that Eisenhower was the appropriate nomination as well. I don't think she was very fond of, I know that she was not very fond of any of the right wing of the party and I would assume that would include Robert Taft, although Taft, it's not fair to say that he was simply a member of the right wing in the sense that we have Sam Nunn and others and all this now who are. But he was regarded that way I think at the time, and Eisenhower was regarded as a more centrist candidate and as someone who would do something about the Korean War which was on many people's minds in the summer of '52.

It was a result of that confluence of interests among my dad and Senator Smith and Eisenhower and my dad's early efforts on Ike's behalf, and my dad's career in the Navy and so forth, as well as his. He had reasonably, he had some legislative experience by that time, he'd been in the house in 1939 before the war, he'd been in the house again immediately after the war in '47 I believe, '48. He was defeated in the primary in an effort to gain his third term in the house and was thus practicing law with his own father in the early fifties and was, Margaret Smith thought very highly of him and nominated him to be U.S. attorney.

I think there was some sentiment that it should go to a large, some member of a firm in

downtown Portland. Someone with, maybe someone older even. My dad at the time was forty-one. But he got the appointment, and he, it was the finest job he ever had. And he had it eight years running in the fifties, and then came back to it eight years later and took another two terms, so he had a total of sixteen years in service. And I would say he loved every minute of it.

AL: What sort of things was he responsible for in that position that made it a very attractive job?

PM: Well, you could, I think my dad enjoyed the iconoclasm of the office, he was able to take on some very interesting cases. He prosecuted some of the first so-called "net worth" cases under the income tax code where people were, oftentimes people of some stature in the community were evading the payment of income taxes through failure to keep good records. And the IRS had difficulty proving that they had evaded those taxes. And so they developed a short circuit method of proving them, and this was all new stuff in the early fifties. You would take a look at somebody's net worth at one point in time and then perhaps five or six years later show that their net worth was something greatly augmented. And then thus be able to prove that the income they had reported during the interim couldn't possibly have been enough to generate those holdings and those assets. So he began prosecuting some fairly prominent people. And my dad liked to prosecute prominent people when they deserved it. He I think would not have been happy as a small time prosecutor in a small office.

I can remember that there were times when there would, there used to be drug cases coming across the border, people in possession of small amounts of marijuana and drugs, at the Calais border crossing perhaps up north. And he used to defer those to the local county prosecutors, didn't think it was befitting the stature of the federal government to be prosecuting those cases when it had other larger issues to deal with. And that it was an appropriate forum in state court to be handling those matters anyway, the dis-, preferably the district court, not the federal district court.

But he took on, he got some calls about environmental pollution at Belfast Harbor, and brought actions to enjoin the chicken industry from disposing of its, of chicken residue into the harbor. And he received word in the, I think it was in 1970, that he received information about the possibility of proceeding under the refuse act of 1898 to prohibit the use of the Kennebec River for log driving and decided that it was appropriate to do that, to prohibit that, and did so. Brought an action and completely changed the way in which the logging business and the pulp and paper business is conducted.

So it, I think he liked the job as an instrument of social change when change seemed to be appropriate. In fact he was able to do it, you know, if you saw the opportunity to do something, in fact you could do it unilaterally. You didn't have to, it wasn't the same as being in the legislature where you have to round up a consensus among a majority of people. I mean you didn't have to worry about the politics of everybody else involved. You could see something that needed doing under the law and just go out and charge. And he liked that aspect of the job.

But we stayed, your question had to do with Margaret Smith, and Margaret Smith obviously was concerned about the job from time to time, I mean there were consultations made about my

father's conduct of the job. She took pride in the fact that he was her appointee, and I think she shared some of his attitudes toward what the job meant. I can remember one story that my dad used to tell quite frequently about, he had, I think this was in his first two terms that he had managed to do the job for quite some time with only one assistant even though the job authorized two. Dad was very happy, he tried all of his cases himself practically in the southern part of the state, and then up in Bangor he had his only assistant, who was trying most of the cases in Bangor. And between the two of them they were managing just fine.

He was quite content with it, and Margaret called him and said, you've got an unfilled job. And he said I don't need an, just pay this other guy a little more, he's good and we'll do the job. She says, "We can't do that, you've got to fill that position, you know, it's just required." So wound up, he did fill it. And I remember there being some controversy about how it was filled at the time. The Justice Department had somebody they wanted to send up and foist off on him and Margaret Smith did not want that then, and there was somebody else here in Maine, Conrad [Keefe] Cyr by name, who was, had been picked by my father and by Margaret I believe for the position. And Margaret intervened very heavily with the Justice Department to make sure they didn't override her own wishes and those of my father.

But every time she ran we got involved in one sense or another, and I can vaguely remember as time went on becoming more and more familiar with a fellow named Bill Lewis who was her administrative assistant, who I now know was involved with her very, very early on, I think from the late forties on as I recall. Maybe even from almost the beginning. Lewis was very well educated, and very smart, and I think helped Margaret in hundreds of ways decide what policies to adopt and how to make decisions from day to day. They were in essence an inseparable team. I think that Lewis had a cynical side and a, I think he had an attitude. I think he kept an enemies list in his head and he knew who was, who Margaret's friends were and who the enemies were, and a lot of policy decisions were made on that basis. And I can remember forming that impression of things from the time when I was a teenager. So it wasn't something, it's not an attitude that I inherited from my parents, or an observation that I inherited from them. It was a... I myself knew him and saw the two of them, Margaret and Bill Lewis together on any number of occasions and I always felt very warm toward Margaret, and one had great difficulty in warming up toward Bill Lewis. And I think one had to, and I think you could also see that Margaret was deferring to him quite often. She had sort of a sense, she always left you understanding that the final decision was always hers, but she deferred to him a great deal for information.

AL: He had a great influence on her decisions?

PM: She didn't do a thing without having a conversation with him about it, at least in my obser-, in my limited, somewhat limited observations of them. But I think she felt sheepish about the fact that she'd only gone through high school. That she was in a position, she was in congress with a bunch of people who were predominantly lawyers, or successful business people, and she was probably the least educated person in congress at that time, very likely. I don't know that, but I suspect it was true. And I suspect very strongly that she had the least formal education of anybody in the U.S. senate probably. I'm sure that in congress there were others that probably had educations that were not quite what hers was perhaps.

I mean, bear in mind that she went to high school in a day and an age when graduating from high school did mean something, the diploma was, meant that you had achieved quite a bit. And she spent her life, her early life in business and at writing for a newspaper and so on. So I mean she had attributes of self education that are not to be ignored, but I think that she felt awkward about being in the company of highly educated people, and thus Lewis, who satisfied that criterion and could write quite well, and I suspect probably Lewis had something to do with writing a great deal of her famous speeches. I don't know. One only presumes that he did. He was very articulate, but he was very snide. He had sort of a sneer in his demeanor, which, unfortunately, reflected his character as well.

AL: And the fact that she was a woman in congress at that time must have also -

PM: I think that may have been less of a problem for her than the perception of the need for more formal education. I don't know. I'm a little sensitive to it because my own grandfather had the same problem. He, and, I mean, I think my grandfather Sumner had that in common with Margaret, he was, Abe Lincoln had the problem. Abraham Lincoln had no formal education, he read law after what was the equivalent of a high school education, as did my grandfather in the 1880s and '90s. He graduated from whatever passed for a secondary school on Stonington and Deer Isle, went down to Northeastern University for a year and then left because his father was ill and there was no one else to support the family, came back to the island. Because he'd had one year of college he was eminently well qualified to teach school and in those days he didn't need a master's degree or anything else, so he taught school and became superintendent at the age of twenty-one. He was the youngest school superintendent in the state of Maine. And he married a book seller, my grandmother was traveling by train selling school books. And they settled down in Stonington and Deer Isle, and when the granite industry fell apart, as concrete came in to replace granite in the early part of this century, Stonington and Deer Isle were an economic wasteland I think, at that time. There had been five thousand men going to work every day on Crotch Island in the harbor, and suddenly there were very few. And he had been in the house and been in the senate from Hancock County, he'd been in the house one term in '03 and, I think in the senate in '05 and '07, and he had two children and a wife to support. And finally in 1911 about the time that his wife was pregnant with my father, they all picked up and moved to Farmington, which was my grandmother's home town. And there were, Farmington at that time was still a very prosperous agricultural town, canning factories and a lot of very rich alluviate river land to grow crops on, and a lot of cattle were raised there and so on.

So in 1911 everything shifted there. But I think my grandfather read law in a law office. After one year of college, that's how he got his license, and always felt bad about it. I remember in, there's a letter that I've got, my brother has circulated to us that he found among my grandfather's papers that he wrote when he was about fifty to some university out west where he said, I understand there's a, that you folks offer a correspondence course toward a law degree and I would like very much to have a law degree. You know, he'd been practicing for twenty-five years at that point, or more. And so I think that there are many people of that generation who, as the twentieth century wore on began to recognize that the lack of... They couldn't afford a formal education, it hadn't held them back from achieving what they wanted to achieve in public life, but it was always regarded as a lapse or a vacuum in their backgrounds.

One that they quite readily made sure that their own children fulfilled. I mean, all three of my, my father and his two siblings, all three of them, for sure went through college and considerably more. I mean two of them went to law school and so on.

But I think Margaret, I think Margaret had, it's, I'm projecting to some extent and speculating, but I think that she had less difficulty with being a woman than she did with being a person that didn't have a formal background and didn't have a B.A. degree and did not have a law degree. I mean so many of her, the people that she was bumping up against were skilled trial lawyers, and here she was taking them on. I think one of her defense mechanisms was oftentimes to withhold judgment until she had every possible fact at her disposal. She was famous for not letting anybody know how she was going to vote.

Now I might have admired that at some earlier stage in my life, I think now that that's, now that I've been, I'm going to be fifty-seven next week and I've six years in the senate, and I understand how difficult that kind of behavior can be. I make it a practice now that if I know how I'm going to vote I let everybody know. And I do it, and I let everybody know precisely because I'm open to being persuaded the other way if somebody has a good argument to make. I want people to challenge me if I'm making the wrong decision. That's how you... And I leave myself open to changing my mind. But on the other hand, I'm very open about how I'm going to vote in an early stage quite often, precisely because I want my notions tested. I don't think that, I sometimes wonder if Margaret, you know, was open to that kind of testing. I really think that she enjoyed simply keeping her cards close until the end and then announcing her vote after she'd heard the debate on the floor, perhaps because she was intellectually uncertain about her preparedness to make that decision. I may be unfair to her, but I, and I know that I'm projecting and speculating, but I suspect that that style of leaving everybody in doubt until the end may have emerged from some insecurity about her own preparedness for that job.

It also, it garnered her a great deal of attention she did enjoy, and in many cases deserved. It also made sure that she did get well informed by people who were responsible to argue either side of the question. And it made sure that she got lobbied appropriately. And there is something to be said for leaving yourself open. If you make up your mind too soon, you tell everybody about it, sometimes they simply leave you alone rather than to try to change your mind, and then you may be missing something that you should know. And so, I mean I can't fault her for her style, but she was known as someone who kept to herself on an issue and she, reserved judgment until a time, sometimes when it was right on the floor. It's very difficult for people around you to plan, of course, or to count votes, to count noses, it's difficult for leadership to deal with you because they don't know what your position is going to be. So there are a lot of reasons in politics but that's not always a good course.

AL: Forgive me, I'm not thinking of the year that Margaret Chase Smith gave her declaration of conscience.

PM: It was '51 I think.

AL: So you were about eight?

PM: I was probably eight or nine and I remember it.

AL: You do?

PM: Oh yeah.

AL: Could you tell me your impressions, you recollections?

PM: Well, we were all very proud. My mother took enormous pride in Margaret Smith's accomplishments, and in knowing, and the fact that she knew her. And this was something that went on over a period of several years during Joseph McCarthy's activities. We moved to Gorham in, as I said, I think in 1952 or '53, purchased our first television set, and in, I think it was 1954 when I was about eleven at least one of the TV networks gave over its time entirely to the Army-McCarthy hearings. And our family hero was Joseph N. Welch, the attorney for the Army, very gracious fellow whose job it was to cross examine witnesses on behalf of the Army, and on the other side was McCarthy himself and his committee's lawyer, Cohn, or Cohen [Ray Cohn]. And I followed the whole thing, I was allowed to stay home from school and watch the whole mess on television. And it was considered in my family highly educational to do that. So it was a good substitute for whatever we were doing in sixth or seventh grade at that point. Sixth grade I imagine. So it followed through, I mean we were quite excited about that face off between McCarthy and Smith and followed it very closely as a family.

AL: Was her declaration of conscience televised?

PM: You know, I, no it, not, if it was it was before we had a TV. Channels didn't, in fact even if we'd had a TV at some point it wouldn't have done any good, the nearest, initial nearest stations were from Boston and at some point, '51, 1951 or '52, they opened up channel six in Portland. And it was very shortly thereafter that we bought a TV and so forth.

So I'm not entirely sure that Maine had, that anybody in the state of Maine really had access to television coverage that could have included it. And I can tell you, I don't really believe they were televising anything that was happening on the floor of congress at that juncture anyway, I just don't remember that there were.

AL: Probably not.

PM: And I don't remember any taping of it, I don't remember hearing it on the radio. It may well have been broadcast but I don't remember it.

AL: So your mother was quite politically, maybe interested in what was going on. Was she active as well?

PM: Yes, she was, oh yes, in a supportive way and always went to conventions with my dad and state and national conventions, and was quite enthusiastic about the Eisenhower campaigns and about any of the Smith campaigns certainly.

AL: When you said the Eisenhower, that Eisenhower came to Farmington -

PM: Yeah he, I can remember that he came to Farmington, and there's a picture in my dad's office that shows him waving from a limousine and I can't tell you whether it was '52 or '56 to be honest. I almost think it was '56, the second time he ran. We were, and I think my dad and my mother went to both conventions but I can't tell you for sure, I think they did. I know they went to '52. Whether they went to '56 or not that doesn't, is escaping me at the moment. But they were certainly big fans and of course on both occasions he was running against Adlai Stevenson, you know, who we all regarded as a very smart guy, and I had some sense of admiration for him just because of his intelligence and whatnot, but he was clearly the adversary in these campaigns, was regarded as such.

I don't have clear memories of Margaret Smith's activities in the mid fifties and so on. I can remember quite vividly in 19-, the winter of '60, '61 she appointed me to the U.S. Naval Academy, and I remember it quite vividly because I had called her up and turned it down. And I felt, I remember I was in the principal's office at the high school where I had made this decision, and there was some pressure on, not pressure, there was some self imposed concern on my part that I was the oldest of five and my family wasn't wealthy by any means and here I had the gift of a free education. And shouldn't I take that rather than rely on family resources and scholarships and so on. But I didn't really want the military. I didn't want the education that was available there, even though I had taken the trouble to apply and I took the exams and did well and all of that sort of thing. And so, I remember calling her up, and stumbling through an apology and she was very gracious, she says, "Just write me a letter, Peter, and tell me that you're not accepting it and that'll be fine." She was always very good to me. To me personally, and to all of my siblings as well. And knew them. And toward the end of her life strangely enough could remember the names of my daughters even though she very infrequently ever saw them. She had a phenomenal memory for names. It was overpowering, it was staggering.

AL: So did you get to visit with her at all in later years being in the Skowhegan area?

PM: Yeah, I mean you would have thought I would have seen her much more frequently than I did. I saw her a lot, she was a person around town all the time. She had lunch at Charrier's Restaurant, the Heritage House, and you would frequently see her around town. And she, her, she had sort of shrunk in her later years physically and came to look almost as if she were a nursing home candidate, and yet her mind was as, I mean, you went up to meet her, although she couldn't see you well and she seemed so feeble, her mind was like a trap even in her nineties. It was astonishing to see.

She was, it was refreshing to see what growing old can be like when it's good, and she was very good at it. She went to, I sat with her at the wedding of my sister Janet, whenever that was, in the mid eighties. And escorted her that day and she was just so sharp. I think she prided herself on being sharp and on being able to demonstrate it to those that she was with. And she succeeded. She had, by that time she had lost Bill Lewis and in terms of what was left of her life, Lewis was less needed. And she'd been defeated by [William D.] Hathaway and she took it with good grace, and what was left was what she'd always been doing which was corresponding assiduously with everyone, she was a, every morning you could drive by what we called the

River Road, which is where her house is located -

AL: I call it the Margaret Chase Smith Road.

PM: It should be renamed. But it's the so-called River Road to Norridgewock and I would drive by, any of us might drive by in the morning on the way to Farmington court or something like that, it's the back way to Farmington. And she'd be in there dictating in the sun room. Actually it wasn't a sun room so much, it was a room with glass partitions you could look through and see her, see her in profile. Every morning, typically dictating correspondence. If you wrote a letter to Margaret, you got two back, you know, she was a phenomenal correspondent. And I think that's what she relied on for her political base we her capacity to keep in touch with so many people by name, by first name.

Many of them had to be passing away, passing on as time went on, but she came to know the younger ones as well. I mean, the fact that she knew my daughters was astonishing to me. Or that she knew them by name and kept track of them. If they were in the newspaper she noticed. I mean, she just, her connections were just astonishing. I mean, to a certain extent that can be regarded as a fault. One might have wished that in her political career she had had the capacity to pay more attention to deeper policy issues and to develop initiatives in her own name that might have, you know, made larger, more pronounced changes in government. Certainly we don't have anything like the Clean Water Bill that we have with Ed Muskie, and the Clean Air, I forget which one is his.

AL: Clean Air and Clean Water.

PM: Both, right. Well we don't have those landmarks, those landmark pieces of legislation that completely changed the landscape of America, we don't have that kind of thing with Margaret Smith. She was not an originator, she was a person who reacted to things that she saw going on around her and she studied carefully, and she made decisions that were perhaps more passive. She never was a person who tried to organize others in political activity toward achieving some common goal the way, you know, Ed Muskie did. So there was a real difference in style and achievement.

AL: Did your father, you said your father was in the legislature in the late forties?

PM: He was in at different, odd times.

AL: Yes, the second time was in the late forties. Ed Muskie started his political career in the state legislature from '46 to '49. Was there ever any discussion by your father of, you know, when Muskie went on to be governor and senator, of him remembering his time together with Muskie?

PM: I have no such memories or observations. I don't know that Ed Mu-, to hear Ed Muskie, I remember speeches by Ed about those days. And there were so few Democrats in the legislature in the late forties that I don't know that their votes particularly counted for very much. And Ed himself described those years as sort of bleak. I mean he was not even appointed to a committee

at different times, he was. The Democrats in those days were essentially ignored. And interestingly enough, the labor movement which we commonly associate with Democrats was focused almost entirely on a certain wing of the Republican Party. And you had Republicans who would vote with labor quite commonly because they felt that way, I mean the ideological divisions were within the Republican party, not so much between parties in those days.

My father was entrapped by that, I've been told that his failure to win the primary when he ran the second time in the forties was, had something to do with his offending people of a more right wing persuasion than he within the party itself. So primaries actually, one might say, they made a difference and they were more. It's where the action was at the time when there was such complete Republican domination of the legislature, as there clearly was in the forties and fifties. So my first memories of Ed Muskie, as probably with most people, is when he rose to ascendancy in running for governor. And I think my dad, I don't know whether my dad ever noticed him in the late forties, I'm sure he did but in what sense I don't know.

AL: I'm going to stop and turn the tape over right here.

PM: Sure.

End of Side A

Side B

AL: We are now on side B of the interview with S. Peter Mills, III on May the 30th, the year 2000. And why don't we start talking a little bit about the 1950s, your recollections of that time period, specifically the 1954 gubernatorial campaign.

PM: I don't, I know that as a kid I was probably very much involved as a cheerleader in some sense because, I know that I was, that was one of my big interests was politics. But I can't tell you very much about it at this late stage. I remember, I vaguely remember the great shock when Muskie became, you know, took the Democratic Party into the Blaine House. But my dad, bear in mind my dad was part of the federal administration and the outcome of the election was probably less crucial to him than to other people in public life. It certainly wasn't threatening to Margaret Smith who had her own following. And I can't remember my father's attitude, or attitudes about those who ran, about Burt Cross or others who ran. My father always had a sort of ambivalent relationship with the Republican party and when it came down to a contest between a moderate Democrat and a right wing Republican my dad would be somewhat uncertain about what to do in that respect. I don't know what attitude he had about Ed Muskie or anybody else. I know that in later years he, he very much, he was very fond of Joe Brennan. He sat next to Joe Brennan in the state senate in the sixties, he gave money to his later gubernatorial campaigns, he was very fond of Joe.

But I, as for the fifties, I can remember rather vividly that the face of Frank Coffin being stapled up on telephone poles all over town. I thought that, as a teenager, at that time I was fifteen years old, I think it was my impression that Frank's rather severe, or his facial features were such that it made him a less attractive candidate perhaps than others. I couldn't even tell you who ran against him at that stage. But Frank was as, you know, I've known him for years since, he's

brilliant and he's wonderful to talk to, he's extremely warm, but he didn't have Ed Muskie's Lincolnesque features or demeanor, and it would have taken someone with remarkable personal qualities in order to win in those days because it was still a Republican state. And Coffin did get, ran, made it to congress a couple of times and did well, so, he did reasonably well. But to win the governorship you have to appeal from north to south and you have to have someone who stands out the way Ed Muskie stood out.

I think, and I hate to say this, but politics, a lot of politics is physical. Abe Lincoln won in some measure because he created an image, he, people saw him, when they saw him they could never forget him and I think that was, the same was true of Ed Muskie. Once you met Ed Muskie, you would recognize that man again any time, any place, in any crowd. And he had these unique physical features which count for a lot when recognition is one of the big issues about getting yourself elected. And Frank was of a more ordinary stature and he had sort of a devilish looking face with his arched eyebrows and so on. I thought he was charming in person, but I don't think he photographed as well.

I don't remember whether Payne was the candidate, was the Republican candidate in '58 but if he had been it wouldn't have been my father's, I don't think my father would have walked across the road for Fred Payne. Payne became senator I believe in '52, U.S. senator, having been governor, and my father had supported an opponent of Payne's in the primary for governor and Payne never forgot it, and when the federal judge in Portland died, Judge Clifford died in '56, Margaret Smith promptly nominated my father to be the next federal judge. We were all so pleased and my dad would have loved that job. And although Payne was junior senator, and Eisenhower after all was president, it was clearly within the power of Eisenhower and Senator Smith to have made my father a judge, but Eisenhower's judicial department, as I recall, wanted both senators, because they were both Republicans, to be in concurrence. They didn't want to have to step on one person's toes versus the other. And so the story goes that they, after the judgeship remained vacant for about six months, they each came up with a list of twenty names and the one name common to both was Ed Gignoux who over time became one of the best judges that the nation has ever seen. He was fabulous.

But no one knew that at the time and in the first couple of years of Gignoux's sitting on the bench he was not a particularly good judge because he hadn't had the experience, and he hadn't even had the experience in trying cases, he wasn't a trial lawyer by training or profession. So it was an awkward time. But, I can't give you too much detail except to give you the personal backgrounds and say to you that I, that if, if Payne was in politics after that, he wasn't anybody my dad would have gone to work for probably. And so if Muskie became the, though on the other hand I don't know of any evidence that my dad had any special, had any ties particularly to Ed Muskie. He did have ties to other people who were Democrats, but Ed Muskie I can't imagine was one of them.

AL: It would be interesting to know in the fifties, when Ed ran for governor, what sort of support there was from Republicans in the Farmington area.

PM: Well, it stood to reason that Muskie got a lot of it because it was the only way he could get elected, there weren't enough independents and Democrats I don't think to truly elect a

Democratic governor, so there must have been a lot of cross over voting. My dad was a little bit detached from politics having, I mean he was in federal office. I don't know that it was his position to take open and public political stances from that job, and so, and I remember the fifties as being a little bit of a latency period in the family's political. After 1953 there was sort of a latency there that. I think we all remained deeply interested, but I don't think we got as pub-, we weren't certainly as publicly involved as my dad was when he left the job as D.A. in what would have been '61 or '62. Then he got right back into it. He went back to Farmington, and then promptly ran for the state senate and was in for several years, mid sixties, became quite active again.

AL: I have a few names I'm just going to mention, you may or may not be able to tell me about them. Agnes Mantor, was that somebody you knew?

PM: Yes, but I can't place -

AL: She was in Farmington, she was a librarian at the University of Maine.

PM: Yes, but I can't do anything more than agree with you. I remember the name.

AL: Okay, right, Lucia Cormier?

PM: Yes, she was the, she was the, wasn't she the head of customs down in Portland, or am I mixing her up with somebody else?

AL: Lucia Cormier was from Rumford and she was in the state legislature.

PM: Yes, and she ran -

AL: And she would have been in around the time that your dad was -

PM: It would come back to me if I had more of a story, because I remember the name well but I don't, I can't place her connections to the family and whatnot. But she ran against Margaret, didn't she, at some point?

AL: She may have.

PM: I'm, I'm, that could be wrong.

AL: Did you know Hal Gosselin, Hal and Julie Gosselin?

PM: No, no.

AL: "Gwil" [Gwilym] Roberts?

PM: Yes, in fact Gwil is, seems to be preserved in formaldehyde over there, he's just, his mind is just as good as it ever, I saw him just about a year ago and he seemed to be in great shape. And

I can't imagine how old he is but he's just as voluble and as active as I remember him, you know, forty years ago. I don't know what he had to do with Margaret Smith, I just don't remember, or with Ed Muskie. I think Gwil was a Democrat. I think he is.

AL: He has been both over the years, sort of I think probably a very moderate Republican and, but more of a historian I would say, and in that sense I thought maybe he had, I know that he had known your father for years.

PM: He has known my father, yes he has, probably from the. From whenever he first got there which might have been as early as 1950. I remember him from very early on, but I don't, I can't tell you a thing about his political activity or what impact he may have had on any of it.

AL: Is there an area that I haven't asked you about that you feel is important to talk about today in the context of our discussions?

PM: Well, I was in the state senate when Margaret Smith passed away, and we spent quite a lot of time on the floor reflecting on that. The best obituary was written by Frank O'Hara for the *Maine Times*, who reflected on her limitations as well as her strengths. And did a nice and very balanced job of evaluating her, and her career, and what was significant, what was important about it, as well as what limitations she had as a person. Some of which I've reflected on in this tape.

But, I think that Ed Muskie and Margaret Smith represent a very interesting contrast in political style, certainly in background. It's sort of interesting that they both come from the same state and they are both somehow typical of the state, and how could that be. I don't know. They're both Maine people through and through. And it's hard to picture either one of them coming from any place else, and yet they had very little in common from a policy perspective, from a matter of style. I suppose in one sense they had certain basic things in common, they were both regarded as very honest. I think they were regarded as people who meant what they say and people you could count on if they made a commitment.

AL: Straight talkers.

PM: Yeah. But beyond that it's a comparison of differences more than anything.

AL: Now one time Margaret Chase Smith did live in a house right here on Water Street, is that, do you have -?

PM: Well, indeed, she was born on North Avenue about a block from here, or two blocks up north of my office, in a house that's still there. Very modest, small home. And later on, and I don't know if she lived on Water Street. She very well may have, but when she got married to Smith, Clyde Smith, they moved into a rather palatial home. I believe one of the Coburn mansions. And it was a very impressive place, and he bought it for political reasons. There wasn't a thing that Clyde Smith didn't do that wasn't oriented toward politics. He was an inveterate politician. Somebody said he ran for office, in his lifetime he stood for office maybe fifty times, and never lost. I mean, in such things as running for selectman, county

commissioner, house of representatives, state senate probably, and then finally congress. He and Margaret lived for politics. I mean it was what they did. And he was much older.

I very rarely run into anybody around who remembers, in Skowhegan, who will reflect on those days. I don't, I have to say maybe they're all gone. Maybe Margaret outlived them all, but you don't hear much about the early history when you're going around town. You don't run into people who are able to tell it to you. It's all stuff since she became famous. Clyde, I don't know where I would, if you asked me to find a person in town who knew Clyde Smith I don't know where to find such a person.

AL: Well yeah, and in part it must be that she lived to such an old age and he was much older than she.

PM: But Clyde was known by literally everyone in 1935 and 1940. He was one of the most popular politicians ever to come out of Somerset county. They spent all of their spare time going to meetings in the evening, and politicking was all they did from dawn to dusk, they say. Those are the stories that you hear, that I've read somewhere. And I can't tell you where but Clyde Smith was an habitual politician. Addicted to it, and addicted to the personal contact, which I think Margaret Smith learned from him and that became her style. No, it was a different style from, we see that a little bit going on now, I mean you have a, [John] Baldacci it seems to me runs on a style of who you know and keeping, making personal contacts and trying to stay on a first name basis with as many thousands of Maine people as he can. Tom Allen seems to be trying to make a name for himself by grappling on to a policy issue of some significance and persuading people to vote for him on the basis of his ideas. Very different styles, two Democrats, different approaches.

Baldacci has never been known for any policy initiative. In the house he had twelve years in the state senate and never had a, there's nothing that you can attach to his name. But, he took care of his constituents and he spent a lot of time making sure that he could get reelected and whatnot and that's a certain style. One can say Margaret Smith was more of that school, and I don't say it with any disrespect in her case, I think that she fell into politics in a situation where because she was a woman. And because she had such a limited education it was hard for her to develop policy initiatives that would have attracted great followings among her peers, and that is, you know, the essence of putting things together. I mean, George Mitchell was a master at getting fifty-one votes around an issue, or sixty-one if the occasion required it, that was what he was good at. And developing, exploring policy, coming to some consensus about what ought to be done in a difficult arena and then developing the votes to get it through.

Lyndon Johnson, by far the best in the twentieth century at that, hands down, absolutely, maybe the best in American history. I mean, nobody passed more legislation, I mean, yes, Franklin Roosevelt did it but Lyndon Johnson went to the Roosevelt school and improved on it. I mean, he took all of John Kennedy's wildest dreams and put them into legislation, and knew how to do it. He was a master at it.

That was not, as much as Margaret Smith and Lyndon Johnson knew each other, they were from very different, had very different capacities and Margaret was not from that school. Margaret

regarded the job as a, I think she regarded herself as kind of a judge who, she was to make decisions that were largely framed by the work of other people, and given her position, given her position in history really, maybe that's what, you know, that is what we should have expected from her. Maybe that's what Maine people wanted from her, I think they did. Someone who was a deciding vote on different issues. I mean, she voted for Social Security in 1965. Just the fact that she voted for it, as a Republican, probably carried a lot of... But it would not have been her role to have invented Social Security or, not Social Security, I mean Medicare, pardon me, sorry. Here we are, Lyndon Johnson invented it, created it, and got the votes, and she threw in with him on it. Partly because she respected him I suspect. I don't know. But you have these, I mean you have these two different, I think you have these very, very different styles that are exemplified by Maine senators. [William S. "Bill"] Cohen I think is more of the Margaret Smith school, more of a responder. He's known more for his votes than for his initiatives. But in his, in Cohen's case, he's also known for his debate and his support and his advocacy on issues that he felt strongly about. But not so much for his initiatives.

AL: Great, thank you very much for your time.

PM: Anytime, no, it was fun.

End of Interview