

Bates College

**SCARAB**

---

Edmund S. Muskie Oral History Collection

Muskie Archives and Special Collections Library

---

8-2-1999

## Mitchell, John oral history interview

Mike Richard

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scarab.bates.edu/muskie\\_oh](https://scarab.bates.edu/muskie_oh)

---

### Recommended Citation

Richard, Mike, "Mitchell, John oral history interview" (1999). *Edmund S. Muskie Oral History Collection*. 276.

[https://scarab.bates.edu/muskie\\_oh/276](https://scarab.bates.edu/muskie_oh/276)

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Muskie Archives and Special Collections Library at SCARAB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Edmund S. Muskie Oral History Collection by an authorized administrator of SCARAB. For more information, please contact [batesscarab@bates.edu](mailto:batesscarab@bates.edu).

## **Interview with John Mitchell by Mike Richard**

*Summary Sheet and Transcript*

### **Interviewee**

Mitchell, John

### **Interviewer**

Richard, Mike

### **Date**

August 2, 1999

### **Place**

Waterville, Maine

### **ID Number**

MOH 132

### **Use Restrictions**

© Bates College. This transcript is provided for individual **Research Purposes Only**; for all other uses, including publication, reproduction and quotation beyond fair use, permission must be obtained in writing from: The Edmund S. Muskie Archives and Special Collections Library, Bates College, 70 Campus Avenue, Lewiston, Maine 04240-6018.

### **Biographical Note**

John P. Mitchell was born on March 18, 1927 in Waterville, Maine. He attended Waterville schools and was active in the Boy's Club and the football, basketball and baseball teams. He served in the military for two years at the end of WWII. He attended University of Rhode Island and became a basketball coach, coaching at Colby College at the time of this interview in 1999. He is the brother of Paul Mitchell, George Mitchell, and Barbara (Mitchell) Atkins, all of whom were interviewed for this project.

### **Scope and Content Note**

Interview includes discussions of: the Boys' Club of Waterville, Maine; Lebanese community; brother Senator George Mitchell; Central Maine Power; Colby College; WWII; Waterville Morning Sentinel; G.I. Bill; University of Rhode Island; and the Waterville, Maine community.

### **Indexed Names**

Atkins, Barbara (Mitchell)

Brennan, Joseph E.

Carey, Richard "Spike"  
Codere, Max  
Coffin, Frank Morey  
Dubord, Robert  
Dubord, Dick  
Dubord, Harold  
Dundas, Paul  
Fullam, Paul  
Gray, Howard  
Gray, Jack  
Green, Theodore Francis, 1867-1966  
Jabar, George  
Jabar, Herb  
Jabar, Jolin  
Jabar, Norm  
Jabar, Paul  
Jabar, Tony  
Julian, Paul  
Kennedy, John F. (John Fitzgerald), 1917-1963  
Laverdiere, Clayton  
Longley, James, Sr.  
McMahon, Dick  
Mitchell, George J. (George John), 1933-  
Mitchell, Mary Saad  
Mitchell, Paul  
Mitchell, Prinella  
Mitchell, Robert  
Mitchell, John  
Muskie, Edmund S., 1914-1996  
Muskie, Jane Gray  
Nadeau, Erlon  
Nicoll, Don  
O'Neill, Tip  
Pastore, John O. (John Orlando), 1907-  
Roosevelt, Franklin D. (Franklin Delano), 1882-1945  
Squire, Russell M.  
Truman, Harry S., 1884-1972

## **Transcript**

**Mike Richard:** The date is August 2nd, 1999, we're at the home of John Mitchell in Waterville, Maine, the time is about 2:30 and interviewing is Mike Richard. And Mr. Mitchell, could you state your full name and spell it, please?

**John Mitchell:** Mike, my name is John Mitchell, John P. Mitchell. I'm assuming you want me

to spell my last name, M-I-T-C-H-E-L-L, much like Senator Mitchell.

**MR:** What a coincidence, yes. And could you give me your date of birth, please?

**JM:** Three, eighteen, twenty-seven, March 18, 1927, Mike.

**MR:** And where were you born?

**JM:** Well, in Massachusetts, Huntington, Massachusetts. My dad and mom were working in factories at that time, before they moved back to Waterville. So my older brother Paul and I were both born in Massachusetts, in Huntington.

**MR:** And how long did you live in Huntington before moving back?

**JM:** I think, Mike, it was maybe three or four years. I think my father's adopted grandfather [*sic* father] passed away and he had to come back and take care of his mother.

**MR:** And have you lived in Waterville for most of your life?

**JM:** Ever since then, except for the time, you know, I spent in the service or at college, and a few jobs that we've had out of Waterville. But most of my adult life has been in Waterville, and all of my growing up years were in Waterville.

**MR:** And what were your parents' names?

**JM:** My father's name was George, George Mitchell, Sr. Actually, his real name was Joseph Michael Kilroy, but he was adopted at a very young age by a Lebanese family whose name was Mitchell. My mother's name was Mary Saad, which is a Lebanese name; my mother was an immigrant from Lebanon, Mary Saad Mitchell after her marriage.

**MR:** And how do you spell the Lebanese name Saad?

**JM:** S-A-A-D, right.

**MR:** And what were your parents' occupations in Waterville?

**JM:** My father worked for the Central Maine Power Company for a number of years as a jackhammer driller. And then the Central Maine Power went out of the gas business. They used to have gas lines, I guess, that fed the stoves for heating and what have you. And so he was unemployed for a year or two, and then his last maybe fifteen or twenty years of work were as a janitor at Colby College.

My mother was a housewife, but during that time she was also a weaver in the mill. She worked in the woolen mills. She worked, Mike, the, generally the two, afternoon or the evening shift; the three to eleven or the eleven to seven shift at night time for about thirty years while we were growing up, and beyond our growing up years.

**MR:** And now you mentioned that your mother was Lebanese (*unintelligible word*)?

**JM:** Right, she was a full-blooded Lebanese, you might say. She came to America with one of her nieces, I'm quite sure it was 1919, as a young girl. I think she might have been about seventeen or eighteen then. And she had two sisters here: one in Waterville, one in Bangor. And I guess she decided to stay in America, and we're all thankful for that.

**MR:** And what was the Lebanese community in Waterville like, when you were growing up?

**JM:** Well, actually, it was a fairly large community. There was a certain area in Waterville. They called it "Header of Falls" in the Front Street area. We have our own church, Maronite church, there, and there probably were about, oh, two hundred fifty Lebanese families. And of course as we were growing up, most of the folks then were from Lebanon, the old timers from Lebanon, so the Arabic language was spoken quite frequently then. And then, of course, as time goes along we integrated quite nicely into the Waterville community.

**MR:** Did your mother speak Arabic at home?

**JM:** My mother, my, yeah, she did. My mother was very fluent. And, well she actually was one of the few Lebanese people here in Waterville that could read and write Arabic, so she did speak. But you know, Mike, I think we, most of the, my brothers and my sister and I understand Arabic quite well, but none of us speak that well because we tried to Americanize our, or Anglicize, my mother more than she did. Although, you know, we can speak a few words. But she did speak Arabic most of the time, and we were trying to make her into a dame, you might say.

**MR:** And did your father ever pick up some Arabic?

**JM:** Yeah, my father, it's a strange case. My dad only went to school, and I'm not positive of this, but either the sixth or seventh grade he got out of school because I guess he had to work to help out his mother. And at home they spoke, my adopted grandmother and grandfather, spoke only Arabic. So he obviously had to learn to speak Arabic, which he did quite well, fluently, as a matter of fact. And then he went to St. Francis School, a Catholic, a French Catholic school in Waterville as a youngster from grade one to grade six or seven. So he was very fluent in French, and of course on the streets he was speaking English. So my father was a, he spoke three languages quite well with a seventh grade education. None of his sons or his daughter is anywhere near like that.

**MR:** Wow, and, now did your mother and father maintain close ties to the Lebanese community here?

**JM:** Yeah, we, the Lebanese community during the time that I, Mike, during the '30s and the '40s was a very tight knit community of folks. Although they all integrated well, most of them were either mill workers or worked in the railroad yards, there were very professional people. There were some. And there were very few business people. That had not occurred yet with the

Lebanese community. I think, Mike, what changed all of that was the war, WWII, where everyone had to go, you know, in the service being of age. And the opportunity to go to college was presented now to almost anyone, if you were a returning service man. So a lot of people who might not have gone to college had the chance to go to college, and because of it many of them became doctors, lawyers, or business people and done quite well.

**MR:** And what were some of the other major ethnic groups in town?

**JM:** Well, the French population, and I'm not quite sure now, I still think it's the largest group in Waterville. And I think during those years, in the '30s and '40s, the French probably, if I were going to put a figure on it, I may be wrong in that, but I would put that around fifty-five to sixty-five percent of the population of Waterville was of French extraction. Then we had the Lebanese population. And there was a, not a huge group of, there were some Italians, not many, there were some families; and Irish background, and of course many English and what, you know, what people might call Yankee backgrounds. And we had quite a sizeable Jewish population in Waterville, many store owners and professional people, and they had their own synagogue and so there was a sizeable Jewish. So Waterville you might say had a pretty good cross-section of people, like many cities. I think, Mike, if you follow, if you follow the rivers in Maine, much like you, in Lewiston with the Androscoggin, you find the mills, the woolen mills, and you find the French population. Many of them had come down from Canada and settled in Waterville, Lewiston, Biddeford, Old Town because of the opportunities to work. The Lebanese, as I say, I think somebody way back started here and, of course, like everything else you kind of migrate to where you can speak the language that somebody you're familiar with can do.

**MR:** And do you remember any ethnic tensions between any groups, maybe in your neighborhood or in the town in general?

**JM:** You mean between the groups, animosities towards the groups?

**MR:** Yes.

**MR:** Not really, Mike. You know, you had the usual, "Oh he's French" or "he's Syrian." In those days we were mostly called Syrians because Lebanon had not yet been established as a country; I think that occurred after WWII. But no, I think we've always been kind of blessed in Waterville. I'm sure there were, and I know there were some prejudices, you know, between groups, but nothing, nothing major or nothing outward that would cause a real problem in town between the different groups. I think young people that go to school tend to melt together. In my own background, my brother Paul's and even in my brother Robbie's and Senator Mitchell's growing up, we all attended the Boys' Club. And, you know, and you're playing baseball or basketball or football, it really doesn't make any difference what background somebody comes from. We were just having a great time playing. So I think those kind of things kind of helped us a little bit in Waterville.

**MR:** And now you mentioned that you had three brothers and one sister, is that right?

**JM:** Right, three brothers; Paul was the older, and I was next, and Robbie was the third, and of course he passed away a couple years ago, and of course George was the youngest of the boys. And my sister Barbara [Mitchell Atkins] was the baby of the family. So there were five of us.

**MR:** And what were the talents and interests of the children in the household?

**JM:** Well, if you ask Senator Mitchell, he'd say, "Oh, my brothers were all athletes," which we were. We all played, Paul and myself and Robbie played football, basketball and baseball throughout our high school careers, and then in college. Paul was a baseball player at the University of Maine, and Robbie and I were basketball players at the University of Rhode Island. George, thank God, deemed it more important to read books and was quite happy, although George was a pretty good athlete but he was quite young in high school, and although he did play some I think, Mike, he became a basketball player at Bowdoin, a pretty good basketball player at Bowdoin.

So, but our other interests, my father, and of course my sister went to Maine. And my father and mother of course insisted that we get a college education. This was even before the war. So it was. They were quite adamant about us going to school and getting an education. In all the cases it worked out quite well. Paul and I were able to go to college through the G.I. Bill, and I also got a scholarship at the University of Rhode Island. And Robbie and George, George went to Bowdoin I think on a number of academic scholarships, along with jobs and what have you. Because at that time, I think when George went to Bowdoin my father was unemployed, so there was not much money in the family at the time. We never did have, my father had a car one year in our lifetime, so, you know, not, we weren't wealthy and we weren't really poor poor, but, you know, there just wasn't a lot of money around. But he went there and did quite well. And Robbie went to the University of Rhode Island and was able to get some scholarship help and work jobs so that we were able to do that and get our education.

The family's quite diversified; I've stayed in coaching most of my life, teaching and coaching. My brother Paul, the older one, has a business, owns an insurance company in Waterville. Robbie was, worked in the bank, was a federal bank examiner and then was the president of a bank in Biddeford for a number of years. My sister taught school for a while. And of course George became a lawyer and was very fortunate that he got to meet Senator Muskie and, who was a great tutor for George, and great things have happened for George. I think because of George's own background, but I also think because Senator Muskie played such a key role in shaping George's mind.

**MR:** And what was it like growing up in Waterville during the Depression? You mentioned that you weren't as wealthy or too, too poor, but how was. . . .?

**JM:** Growing up was, we all found it, you know, we meet with some of the old timers and we all enjoyed. . . . You know Mike, I think most people then didn't have much so you never thought you were just a small minority of poor people, you might say, so that we walked to school, but so did everyone else walk to school. We didn't have a car and many families didn't have cars. And bicycles, if you had a bicycle you thought you were a millionaire and, there wasn't any around. So those things weren't bad. I, the benefit we got in Waterville, as I

mentioned earlier, was the Boys' Club, at least for the boys anyway. We were able to share a lot of good hours at the Boys' Club and learn to play ball and share with other kids, you know. The, if you might, you know, the Jewish boys or the Irish kids and the French kids, so it really didn't make a difference. If, you know, you're there and you're playing, if you make a mistake they didn't call you an ethnic name, or if they did you didn't call them. You might call them a jerk, but not an ethnic name. So I think those were good.

And of course, my tie in with Senator Muskie is actually through Jane. Jane and I were classmates all the way through school; we went to high school together. And Jane lived around the corner from where we lived during our high school careers. And so I knew Jane quite well, much better than I knew Ed Muskie. I always thought Ed Muskie would succeed because he made the best choice of his life when he picked Jane. And, I mean, he couldn't have made a better choice. And obviously I was right because she put him on a great path. But I, I used to watch them when they first started dating and it was a wonderful romance to see the two of them sitting down. And I'm sure that Senator Muskie was talking politics with Jane, but she was a great companion and great person to be with Ed Muskie.

**MR:** And, what was Jane like when you were growing up knowing her as a friend?

**JM:** Jane was a very quiet person, nice person, but not totally outgoing and not flashy at all, much like the Jane Muskie of the years as a governor's wife and a senator's wife who handled herself with such grace all those years. And she was pretty much like that during her high school career, she was a nice. Jane was a nice person, very nice person.

**MR:** And did you get to know the rest of the Gray family?

**JM:** I knew them, but I didn't know them well, Mike. I knew her sister and I knew her brother Howard and Jack Gray, but I did not know them as well. And then once we got to know Senator Muskie, I got to know Senator Muskie quite well, even before George's time actually. We, you know, we watched him prosper, you might say, in politics, as he went along. He was such a straight shooter and such an honest guy. And he was always a guy that if you saw somewhere, he'd always remember you and call you by name, and so we always enjoyed him. But the Gray family was a nice family in Waterville; they were a highly respected family in Waterville.

**MR:** And what were your parents' political beliefs?

**JM:** Well, you know, you know Mike, I would guess that we didn't have much of a political background in that sense, seeing that my mother didn't read English and no TV then to speak of, and you know, my dad with a limited education, although he was interested in politics. I think the dominant figure in their lives was Franklin Roosevelt, because my mother thought, you know, that he was- you know, the earth just revolved around Franklin Roosevelt. Because she came from Lebanon and she learned, and I'm, was always quite happy about that, that America was a great place. It gave her a chance to work, even though she came from pretty good means in the old country. And then she saw her children flourish in America where, if you were in another country in the Middle East or in Europe and you came from a poor family, many times you don't have the chance to go to college. But in America we had. So she, even though she



didn't speak English very well and those kind of things, always loved America. And so their political leanings, you'd have to say, by choice had to be Democratic and not Republican because most of their lives that we know were during Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman's time. And then later on, of course, like many people in America, she fell in love with Jack Kennedy as most mothers did.

**MR:** And did you talk about politics much or at all in the home, like at the dinner table or. . . .?

**JM:** No, you know, that was not a high voltage topic, although I must confess, although we did. My father had a great interest in geography and we used to sit and he'd ask each one of us the capital of Australia and the capital of China and we'd do that kind of thing. But getting into political chit chat was not really part of the, I think we did more talking about geography and then, of course, sports. And that seemed to be the. . . . I- that might have changed once Paul and I, we were the older ones, had left to go in the service or maybe to college. I don't know if George had a dying interest in politics either until he got out of college. So I, like I say, I don't think it was a high burner topic in our family at that time.

**MR:** And what about your parents' religious beliefs?

**JM:** We were all Catholic. My mother and, our background, the Maronite is a Catholic offshoot. It's not the Roman Catholic but very similar, and my father, of course, Irish Catholic by birth, and then of course through the Lebanese population. And we all attended St. Joseph's Maronite Church. And beginning with Robbie, and then George and my sister Barbara, they all attended St. Joseph's Maronite School. That started after my brother Paul and I got into junior high. I think it only went from K to six or something like that. So George's early beginning and Robbie's early beginning, and Barbara's, the six, the first six grades I think were in St. Joseph's Maronite School. A very small school, there weren't many students. And I think, Mike, if I remember correctly, one room had one, two and three, or, yeah, one, two and three, and the other four and five and six.

And George had a, had a head start I guess you might say. They, the nuns who were teaching there, the Ursuline nuns, found him to be quite bright and he was pushed up, as they did in those days in the parochial schools, two classes. So he ended up a very young graduate in high school. As a matter of fact, they wanted to even shove him up another grade and we all put that down because it would have, it might have made him like a very young fifteen out of high school. So we thought it was not right to do that. But that, I guess you might say that there is some value in even those small schools and two classes in one room, or three classes, whatever it is, you never know. I don't know what makes a great educational background. Obviously your own talents, but that's the text of what went on in the family religious-wise, and we've all remained in the Catholic faith. We're not rabid I don't think, at least in my case we're not, Mike. You know, we're very tolerant of, and my mother was always quite tolerant of other religious groups, as was my father too.

**MR:** And how do you think, what are some of the ways in general that your parents, through your family life, affected you while you were growing up?

**JM:** Well they, Mike, they both were very hard workers and sacrificed greatly for the five of us, you know. They, as I said, and no car except one year I think, my father had an old Chevy one year. He'd walk to work. And my mother, as I said, worked at least twenty-five to thirty years three to eleven or eleven to seven at night, but always provided hot meals for us. And, and you know, they were, it was just wonderful to see, you know. I think you learn to respect that even more as you grow older and see what happens, what an impact they had on you even though at the time we don't know that.

And of course, as most people in those days, in the '30s and '40s, people from the old countries and the first generation, authority meant authority and the police were to be respected, the teachers were to be respected, coaches were to be respected. You know, you just didn't come home and say Mr. So-and-so is cruel or Miss So-and-so, because you got nowhere with your parents then. Maybe it was wrong, but they taught you at least a sense of, you know, staying within yourself and the community. But they were great role models without being a role model, if you follow what I'm trying to say on that.

**MR:** Who were some of the other people, or what were some of the groups in town that weren't in your family that were very influential on you growing up?

**JM:** Yeah, I, the, well Mike, as I mentioned before, the Boys' Club played a really powerful role, and we've always been great supporters of the Boys' Club because we all attended there and it was a home away from home, and my mother always felt comfortable with us being at the Boys' Club. And it wasn't a great distance from our home, so that it was, you know, a pretty nice set up that way.

And there are a number of teachers in the school system. . . . And like in many cases, the coach that we had at Waterville High was a wonderful person, Wally Donovan, who played a key role in some of the things that I was able to do. And of course, you'd have to say that the church played a, at least during our early years, a quite strong role in our upbringing and what have you. So that would be about the-

But I really can't emphasize enough the role that the Boys' Club played in our. . . . Because from early September when school began, until early June or the middle of June when school closed, six days a week, five days from school and Saturday, most of the time was spent at the Boys' Club. In a controlled atmosphere, but spent there at the Boys' Club which was a, which, you know, when you think of it it's almost like a paid babysitter in some ways if your family feels comfortable, and ours did.

And of course, Mike, we got jobs too. We argue in the family, we used to argue. My brother Robbie figured he started working when he was ten or eleven years old in the woods, as a woodsman. My brother Paul and I worked in stores. I'm really not quite sure what George did, he probably was studying. But anyway, so we always had jobs besides that, but that would be about the, and you know. . . . I should mention. I think in those days, in the late '30s and the '40s we delivered papers. And the *Waterville Sentinel* then, I think, played a pretty good role in our backgrounds because it was- it was very much a local paper with local people running it. And you got to know the people, you got. . . . In my case I got to know the sports writers and the

people in the sports department. And I imagine as George progressed in his career the editorial people and like that became paramount in his thing, but they were important too.

**MR:** And you mentioned you went through public schools in Waterville through high school?

**JM:** Yes, right from K to, K through, Paul and I both did. As I said, Mike, because St. Joseph's Maronite had not started until after we were in the seventh or eighth grade and then they started the Lebanese school. So we always went to public schools.

**MR:** And what were some of your biggest interests in the school, through high school?

**JM:** Oh, I've got to say that, football, basketball and baseball, you know. We just played and played and played. And that doesn't mean that we didn't study, because we had to, my father insisted on grades too. And I was not an outstanding student but I did a decent job, and my brothers all were pretty good students. And my sister Barbara was an excellent student, so. But I think those were the, those were the primary interests in our lives. I know it's sad to say that, but that's the way it was.

**MR:** Do you remember some coaches or anyone who was a really big influence on you, teachers or . . . ?

**JM:** Well just the one, just Wally Donovan was a really good influence. And he's the one that kind of shaped my athletic career, during the . . . . And we had pretty good teams, Mike, at Waterville. We were state champions two years and New England champions one year, and football champion and like that. So our career was, if you want to rank it, you know, we were a top-rated athletic group, who also produced academically because of that team that I mentioned to you. By the way, the, you asked about ethnic backgrounds. The team that, in 1944 we won the New England championship, and there were six Lebanese boys out of ten on the team, one Jewish boy, two Irish youngsters, and one Yankee if you want to call him that. But, so there was a pretty good mixture there and we won all our games. We didn't lose a game that year. So that played a big role, Mike.

I think the thing that, as I mentioned a little bit earlier, that changed the whole picture, though, was WWII. There were not many families that escaped having somebody either wounded or killed. We were very fortunate because only Paul and I got in the war. And I got in very late, four months before the war ended, and Paul was in only a year. But anywhere down the street there would be either a brother or a cousin or an uncle of somebody, and, you know, because of the magnitude of WWII and the number of people that went in the service. So that kind of shaped your thinking in many ways. And then when the war ended and so many of us went to school, it just turned everything around for everyone. I thought anyway.

**MR:** Now did you go into the service right after graduating from high school?

**JM:** Right out of high school, as most of the guys did then. You'd graduate we'll say June 15, and by June 25 or June 30th you were gone, either in the Navy or the Army and, or the Marine Corps. In my case it was the Navy.

**MR:** And where did you serve with the Navy?

**JM:** I, all stateside because the war ended. The war ended four months after my induction in the Navy, and I guess I got to be blessed again for that. And, but most of the guys that I, you know, that I grew up with and all your friends, just about everyone was in the service then.

**MR:** And you stayed in the service for just a few months?

**JM:** No, as soon as I was able to get out I came out, which was almost two years, almost two years in the service. Got out and then went to college shortly thereafter, to the University of Rhode Island.

**MR:** And you mentioned you got a scholarship there, was that one of the main attractions?

**JM:** Yeah, in basketball, right, plus the G.I. Bill. So my four years were, either by the G.I. Bill or by scholarships, was pretty much taken care of. Which was a great relief to, you know, to my parents at the time because Paul was also in school, but he had the G.I. Bill. And Robbie and George were just getting out of high school, ready to go into college without the G.I. Bill. So the burden was taken off my parents somewhat because of the G.I. Bill. Not only them but most other parents, too, in the same category.

**MR:** And was the availability of the scholarship, was that a main factor in choosing URI in particular or were there others factors?

**JM:** Yeah, I think, Mike, had I not had the G.I. Bill, I still think I might have gotten a, as you call them, a full ride at University of Rhode Island because of the basketball background. But the fact that you don't need it because of the G.I. Bill, I only got partials all the way through.

**MR:** And what were some of the, your interest in URI, obviously basketball was really big, but.  
...

**JM:** That was the big one. Once again, I, and I'm really, you know, Mike, it's puzzling to me as I think back, and I wish that I had become more of a student then and concentrated more, but once again. . . . And of course my eyes are opened up now because you're, even though the service, you saw people from other parts of the country, but all of a sudden, you know, you're starting to see, you know, people from New York or Massachusetts on a regular basis in college. And you, your whole outlook changes and it did mine, and I was happy for that. I enjoyed my years at Rhode Island. Most of my friends went to the University of Maine and, as my brother Paul went. But I just don't, I can't say that I got academically charged up. I did my job but not to the point.

And frankly, I, my interest in politics started to grow quite heavily at Rhode Island. President Truman was the president then and I don't ever remember my father saying "You're a Democrat," or "You're a Republican." I think we just fell into the slot and so I started to get interested in politics. And then up- I never, all through my life, never aspired to run in politics

and I never did. In every case, in Senator Muskie's case I would do whatever they ask you to do, you know, put stamps on or put signs up. In my brother's case, George, we did the same thing. And when my brother Paul, the older one, who was the first politician actually, he was local, ran for the alderman's seat, we did the same thing for him. So, but I never, myself, personally wanted to run for public office. It just wasn't my bag. Let me put it that way.

**MR:** And were you involved in any campaigns other than your brothers' and Senator Muskie's?

**JM:** Not really directly. I contributed a little money, or, if they would call, Mike, and say "Would you put up a sign?" I would do that. Or if they say, "Would you help us deliver something?" I would do that, but not as a consultant or anything else, never.

**MR:** So really outside of the circle of your brother George's political connections, and Senator Muskie, you didn't really (*unintelligible word*)?

**JM:** That's right, it was, basically it started with Senator Muskie and then culminated with George's. You know, we were quite- you know, politics is- As you know, it can be a lot like athletics, you know. You play the game and you lose and you're very disheartened. And I coached for many years, but I found the difference being, and it was almost heartbreaking in politics, when my brother George ran for governor, I believe it was '72 or '73 and then was beaten by independent Jim Longley from Lewiston. Jesus. Then you start thinking, you know, it's going to be two or four years before he runs again. It's not like football or basketball, next week or three days down the road I have a chance to come back and win another game. And I must confess that of all the heartbreaks I've had in sports and in politics, that was the most heartbreaking experience of my life; losing in politics. So it's a very difficult thing. I was convinced then that I wanted nothing to do with my own feelings running for politics, I just said, "Let my brother George handle it." But it was a very sad day that, a very sad night actually, that night when the senator was running for governor then, and didn't come out on top, probably the best thing that ever happened to him, though.

**MR:** And you mentioned you were getting more interested in politics in college, were you involved in any political clubs or?

**JM:** No, I was not involved at all except that I- I just started taking a deeper interest in what the president was doing, what the campaigns were like. And politics were hot and heavy in Rhode Island, and at that time most of the big names in Rhode Island were Democrats, [Theodore] Francis Green, Senator Green, and Governor Pastore and men like that. So I did get interested in that. And of course I think your horizons widen, even whether you like it or not, they widen in college, you know. And then for the first time you saw the other side of the fence also. There were many heated debates, and I never was part of them, but between people who were very anti-Harry Truman and very pro-Harry Truman. And then the arguments would, you know, in the fraternity house or in the, but. . . . And then of course at that time I think Senator Muskie might have just been starting his political career back in Waterville. I'm not exactly sure the sequence of Muskie's, but I think I was gone at the time.

**MR:** Yeah, I think he started at the State House like '46 or '47 or so, so.

**JM:** Yeah, and that would be the year that I started at the University of Rhode Island. I do know that when he first, if I'm, I may be correct on this, getting a meeting of Democrats to meet Senator Muskie, who was not the governor then, he was just a lawyer in Waterville, Maine. You were lucky to get twenty people at meetings. You know, sit down and listen to Ed Muskie say what he's going to do as governor of, I'm sure that somebody in your interviews must have said that. You know that Senator Muskie was beaten in Waterville for the mayor's seat by a local businessman, who was a nice man, Russ Squire. But, you know, when you think of it, Ed Muskie, the giant of giants in Maine, he starts off and is beaten in Waterville. In Waterville of all places, Mike, because Waterville in those days would be much like Lewiston and Biddeford, maybe sixty-five or seventy (*unintelligible word*) had registration as Democratic, so. Maybe Tip O'Neil was right, politics is local. But that's, that would be my feelings about my political feelings.

And then after college of course I really became interested, and politics is almost like a sub thing with me with sports now, politics and sports. Muskie got us really going on a national scale, Senator Muskie did, you know, because he kept improving and improving. And of course as he would move up, George Mitchell was part of his group, you know, consultant or whatever he might have been at the time. And so our interest grew even more pointed because of the association with your brother. And many, the president or the vice president would come to Maine on one of those political rallies. And we always, in most cases we were able to meet personally because of the Senat-, George Mitchell being with Senator Muskie. So it was always nice that way. And so, since that time, I'm not sure whether I read the political page or the sports page first now.

**MR:** What was your major at URI?

**JM:** I was a business major, not a phys. ed. major. I thought I might want to get into the business field but it just didn't work out that way. But I enjoyed, and I was a history major, I mean minor, history minor, so I enjoyed history and took all my electives in history.

**MR:** And you graduated, it must have been '50 or '51?

**JM:** Fifty-one, right. And then [I] stayed right at the university one year, Mike, as the assistant basketball coach before I then moved on. My wife and I moved to Washington, I worked for an insurance company, she worked in a bank. And then we came back to Maine the middle '50s and I taught school and coached at a Catholic high school in Bangor, John the Baptist High School, for four years. Then I, we went out west one year to Tucson, Arizona when I taught school there at a Catholic high school, and then we came back to Waterville, it would be '58 or '59 I think, and we've been in Waterville ever since. And I, most of those years have been as a teacher and a coach. And I'm still, even though I don't teach any more, I've been retired from teaching now for about twelve years, an assistant coach at Colby now the last, actually thirty-three years.

**MR:** And what subjects have you taught, in what subject have you taught?

**JM:** Mostly history or government courses, problems of democracy, and some geography, about half and half, Mike, between high school and junior high school.

**MR:** And, now you mentioned your wife, Prin [Prunella Mitchell]. When did you meet her?

**JM:** Prin? Prin was a Winslow native. She, I met her actually at a dance at the grange hall. And she was the head cheerleader at Winslow the years that I was playing at Waterville, so we go back even longer than our marriage. We go back, oh, 1945, Mike, when we first met. And Prin never went to college, but she also was, caught the political bug. She, she supported Senator Muskie way back and went to all of his early meetings. Those were the years when I was in college. And she would go to all the meetings with a few friends of ours. So she got, although she never ran or anything else, she did most of the work like we would do; posters, signs, seal envelopes or whatever.

**MR:** Now what was, you mentioned you were in Washington for the early '50s, early or mid '50s (*unintelligible word*)?

**JM:** Right, '52 until '54.

**MR:** So what was the time there like, compared to being in Waterville? Very different I would think.

**JM:** Well, it was very different and, it's a great experience. Washington is a nice place, but unless you make a lot of money, which we didn't do, it becomes a tough place to live. And once we started to raise a family we decided that we just didn't want to be in Washington. And our decision to come back to Maine was a wise one at the time. Had we pursued the insurance or the other, the bank as a, I'm sure that we would have come back to Maine eventually. We just came back a little earlier than we thought we might, Mike. And it was, I think Truman was still the president, and then Dwight Eisenhower was elected president the, my, the last year we were in Washington. Matter of fact, we went to the inaugural parade on one of the streets, H Street or G Street or something, a seven-hour parade or something. It was nice to go to Bill Clinton's inauguration, because George Mitchell was a senator then so our seating was a little better.

**MR:** And, let's see, okay, yeah, when were you first involved with your brother George's campaigns, what was the first campaign?

**JM:** During the gubernatorial- actually, actually Mike, no. It could have been a little earlier. I think when he was the Maine state chairman- the party chairman, there would be things that he might want us to run errands, not on a regular basis but once in a while. "Would you go to Bangor and take these things up for me?", or something like that. I remember one time actually, he asked me to drive Senator Muskie and Jane to Bangor to speak at, I even recall the name of the club, the Tarratine Club [[http://www.bpl.lib.me.us/spcoll/tarratine\\_club.htm](http://www.bpl.lib.me.us/spcoll/tarratine_club.htm)]. And I did, I drove Senator Muskie and Jane to the Tarratine Club where he spoke, and then drove them back to China Lake where they had their camp on China Lake. So those would be the kind of things that I started with, with George. And then as he got into it himself personally, then we became more personally involved. But as I said, never as a consultant, even though he asks all the

family, but mostly delivering envelopes or putting signs up or anything at all that. . . .

*End of Side A*

*Side B*

**MR:** This is the second side of the tape of the interview with John Mitchell on August 2nd, 1999. And we were starting to talk about your first campaign for George that you were involved in, the gubernatorial campaign?

**JM:** Right, Mike, he, I think when George was the Maine party chairman, the Democratic chairman, we would run errands for him, but not on a regular basis; he might want you to do something. And I recall one time when he asked me to transport Senator Muskie and Jane to Bangor. Senator Muskie was speaking at the Tarratine Club and I drove them up and took them back to China Lake after the thing. And those would be the kind of things that, affairs that George might ask us to do favors for. And then of course as he became involved himself personally, running for governor and then later on as senator, we became more personally involved, never as consultants in that respect, but always to do sign work; stuffing envelopes and what have you.

**MR:** And you continued to do these jobs through George's later senatorial campaigns?

**JM:** Right, all the way through, right, you know, you, when Senator Muskie I guess played a role in George Mitchell becoming the senator with, Governor Brennan selected George as a senator to fill in for Senator Muskie. And I can remember the feeling that many people had that how, you know, how can George fill in Senator Muskie's shoes, actually size-wise and otherwise? Senator Muskie had pretty big feet. But anyway, I always knew that Senator Muskie had a great respect for my brother George, and a great respect for his intellect.

And I remember telling someone and they said, "Well, jeez, I, your brother has to run in about two and a half years when the term is up." And I said, "Well, that gives him two and a half years." And when people meet George Mitchell in small groups they learn to know who he is. Because prior to that time, Mike, they had always thought that he was too judicial, too stiff, too scholarly in his speeches and what have you, but we knew him as a really nice guy and a friendly guy. And I think he, I think he learned how to work crowds being around Senator Muskie all those years, too. Actually the good and the bad, if Senator Muskie would explode on occasions, and I think George always said, "I don't want to get to that point if I can help it." And sometimes I don't blame Senator Muskie, I think you ought to explode once in a while. But anyway, that's, that would be about the extent of my things with George.

**MR:** Now you mentioned Muskie's temper. What exactly is your take on his temper? People have mentioned that he used it or sometimes it was used for another purpose?

**JM:** Well I never experienced it, Mike, directly. My relationships with Senator Muskie were always very cordial and very friendly. And I guess if you're going to talk about the temper, you'd have to talk to folks that directly worked for Senator Muskie, or maybe people in the press who might have had. . . . But I, I'm sure it's true because too many people have mentioned it not



to be true. But I can honestly say that I never experienced it. And I always thought he got a bad rap in New Hampshire, with your paper, the *Manchester* whatever. And surprisingly, Mike, the critique at the time, the critics, was that Muskie was crying. And so if he's crying, so what? Now, it's almost stylish to cry. All these big athletes cry all the time. And now you become a real man if you cry about your father or mother being sick, or your wife, or. . . . And then, of course, the *Manchester Union* really butchered Senator Muskie and I kind of thought it was a bad rap. And we always wondered what would have happened had he survived and made the run, because I feel certain that Muskie would have been a great president for the United States also at the time. But anyway, I can't tell you directly, Mike, about his temper. Maybe George Mitchell can or Don Nicolls [*sic* Nicoll] can or somebody else can.

**MR:** And, talking about Senator Muskie, when did you first meet him?

**JM:** I would say I met him somewhere in the middle '40s, I can't tell you exactly, '46 maybe, '47, when he was a young lawyer here and starting to date Jane. And on my way home I would see them parked in the car on Union Street, not doing anything wrong, but talking. And then you get to know, Waterville is not that big a town, so, but his reputation and the Mitchell family were quite well known, so, and knowing Jane, of course. As a matter of fact, I think Jane might have come to our earlier reunions, our class reunions. I'm talking about the '50s and I think. I'm not sure whether the senator or the governor at the time came to our reunions, but I know Jane did a few times, so that kind of a connection, Mike, the early connection with Senator Muskie. After that it grew, as I said to you, a little tighter and a little warmer because of the association in politics and with George being there.

**MR:** So you really, did you work with Senator Muskie at all in his campaigns during the governor period, or was it later you said, in the '60s?

**JM:** No, it was later. I was in Arizona when he won the governorship, and we were so happy when we read the paper out there in Arizona that he had won. And I played golf with the senator a few times. Even then he didn't show a temper, said a few choice words but nothing really bad, nothing worse than I would say either.

**MR:** What was he like as you got to know him more?

**JM:** I really liked him. I never engaged in deep conversation with Senator Muskie but he seemed to be able to know what to say to you and what to talk to you about. And he knew my associations in sports so we would generally have a few words, and then maybe about, "How is Jane doing?" or "How is Prin doing?" or something like that. So our conversations were quite general and quite friendly most of the time, Mike.

**MR:** And did you get to know other members of the Muskie family?

**JM:** No, not really. I met the children, but always at political gatherings where it's, "Hi" and "how are you?" and "Hi," and "how are you?", never in a close association.

**MR:** Okay, well I guess I'll start asking you- I've got a little list of people that Don [Nicoll]

wanted me to ask you about, who you might have some information on. And the first person is Frank Coffin?

**JM:** Mike, I did meet Frank Coffin, except much like the Muskie people, at political functions, and only, "Hello, how are you?" and, "I'm George Mitchell's brother," and what have you, so. But I always heard such wonderful things about Judge Coffin. He, along with Senator Muskie, were the two intellects in Maine, and I guess equally responsible for the rise of the Democratic Party as a state, as a, you know, viable party. They made the party together. But I really cannot tell you that much about Frank Coffin other than that, Mike.

**MR:** Okay, and what about Max Codere?

**JM:** Maxie Codere was a local man. Yes, Maxie was very much in politics, behind-the-scenes kind of a guy. Wonderful person, lived around the corner from us here. And I'm sure that Ed Muskie thought highly of Max Codere and I know Max Codere thought highly of Ed Muskie. And I imagine you'd have to be a bad Democrat for Max Codere not to like you very much. But he was a wonderful person, yes, I knew Maxie well.

**MR:** And how about, well of course Don Nicoll?

**JM:** Don, oh, I met Don through Senator Muskie's office and through George Mitchell. And I always liked Don and, a hard worker, and I, as I, I think, I'm not positive, I think he might have been George Mitchell's first boss in the office. Maybe he's the guy that George Mitchell started the right way.

**MR:** Let's see, Erlon Nadeau, did you know him?

**JM:** Erlon Nadeau was another old political junkie from the South End, they called it, which would be the so-called French area of Waterville, although most of Waterville was of French background. But, and he was an old plugger and an old, you kind of had to kowtow to Erlon to get, get him to get his hundred fifty votes down in ward seven or what have you. And I'm sure that he's another big supporter of Senator Muskie in the early, in the '40s when the governor, when he became governor.

**MR:** How about Harold Dubord?

**JM:** Harold Dubord, wonderful person. I, this, oh, this is Harold Dubord, I didn't, no, I didn't know him, Judge Dubord. He was the dad of Dick Dubord who was very good friends with me. I did not know Harold Dubord at all, but I knew the family. I knew Dick Dubord and his brother Bob, but I didn't know the judge at all, Mike.

**MR:** What were Dick and Bob like?

**JM:** Oh, Dick Dubord was a wonderful person who unfortunately died at a very young age. And I guess at one time he was a very, very close friend of Senator Muskie and was one of his early confidantes, and what have you. Bob Dubord, the brother, was younger than Dick, the

dentist, who had a wonderful sense of humor, and wonderful Democrats both of them. And Bob still is a great Democrat, and his wife, but they were early, early Muskie supporters, very good ones. And as I said, unfortunately Dick Dubord passed away much too early in his life.

**MR:** And, well obviously George Mitchell I've got here.

**JM:** George, well. . . .

**MR:** Probably. . . .

**JM:** George can speak for himself. He does a good job at it.

**MR:** George Jabar? Or Jabar?

**JM:** George Jabar, yeah, father to a family that, a Lebanese family whose sons, three of his sons, we were in school together and played ball together and, Herbie, Normie and John. And then the next group of children he had, Paul and Tony Jabar, played in high school with my brother Robbie and with George. So there's a big family tie in. George Jabar's the old union man of Waterville, Maine, in the middle '30s, and CIO; was behind this "we shall be moved," and was a very, very strong Democrat, very strong pusher of Democratic principles. And his family, all of the boys, and I imagine the sisters, are still. . . . And John Jabar, who is a lawyer now and has been for years, who was in school with me and with Jane, worked in Senator Muskie's field office in Waterville for a number of years. So there was a big tie-in there between the families. George Jabar was one of the original union people in Waterville, Maine, and then, when the union was first starting to flourish here. You didn't mind me singing did you, (*unintelligible phrase*)? I remember that song from the '30s.

**MR:** How about Paul Dundas?

**JM:** Paul Dundas, the mayor of Waterville. And when you say politics is local, you have to think that Paul Dundas was very local and a nice man and a good mayor. And I think in those days, Mike, I'm not positive but I'm quite sure, he might have been a mayor like four or five terms, but I think the terms were only one year then. And I, he did a nice job, and was a very friendly guy, with an Irish background I believe, and another early Democrat.

And, Ed Muskie had great support once he got into the, once he got into the mode of running I think. You almost have to liken Senator Muskie and George's careers in some ways; when Muskie was defeated as a candidate for mayor in Waterville, Maine, and George Mitchell was leaning, running for governor and they both were beaten. And for whatever we know, maybe God set it up that way, they both went on to such greater things on a national scale that maybe it was the best thing in the world that happened to them, I don't know. Can you tell me, Mike?

**MR:** I sure can't.

**JM:** Don Nicolls [*sic*] [Nicoll] can probably tell us.

**MR:** How about Dick McMahon?

**JM:** You know, Dick McMahon, and I did, I know him quite well, he was very friendly with my brother Robbie, but he was the “know-how” guy in Waterville. I think he was Ed Muskie’s guy that would tell Ed Muskie, “I think you ought to do this,” or “you shouldn’t do that,” or “you should do this,” in the early years. I don’t know what went on after, but I think he was the political brains in the early going of Muskie’s campaigns in Maine, a really nice guy, Dick McMahon.

**MR:** Okay, oh, Paul Fullam?

**JM:** Professor Fullam I didn’t know; I know of him, at Colby College. But I wasn’t privy to knowing him at all. I might have met him for a minute or so, but that was it. But highly thought of and well-respected in local and in the state, Mike.

**MR:** How about Paul Julian?

**JM:** Paul Julian is another, you must have gotten the story from him on, from my brother Paul, didn’t you, whoever interviewed my brother Paul. Because Paul, my brother Paul went to work for Paul Julian in the insurance office, and then I think bought that, the agency, through Paul. I didn’t know him well but he’s another. . . . This is, boy, this is really the Muskie group when you’re talking Dundas and Julian and Dick McMahon, that’s. . . . But he was another old political, and I use the word in a nice way, junkie in Waterville, that got going. And I believe his background is an Irish background, too. I’m not positive of that, but I think there was that little Irish clique in there, that got going there.

**MR:** Okay, and last but not least is Spike Carey.

**JM:** Spike Carey, Spike Carey, Spike is an interesting character. Spike is my age, maybe a little younger, and we went to school together in Waterville, and was always interested in politics I guess, and was involved in everything. And Spike liked to play politics, he, even though he was a Democrat sometimes you had a hard time getting him to come to your, your ways of thinking. But I think Spike served as mayor for two or three terms, did a nice job, and then was a member of the House and is now a member of the Senate I think, the Maine State Senate. And if I’m not mistaken, Mike, I think he ran for governor one time. But Spike was pretty much a Waterville, Central Maine politician more than anything. But when I think of it, I really don’t know what Spike’s association was, with Senator Muskie was. I’m sure they must have had some kind of an association, but I don’t know what it was. And I’m sure that Spike played a key role in the early Muskie campaigns. Once again, in the south they call it, the South End, which was the heavily populated French area that would produce the victories in Waterville. We’ll say out of two hundred fifty, two hundred seventy-five voters, the Democrat would get two hundred votes, two hundred twenty votes, much like some of the wards that used to be in Lewiston. Not so much any more, is it, in Lewiston?

**MR:** With the Franco clubs thing?

**JM:** Yeah, it doesn't go as easily as it used to.

**MR:** I don't think it does.

**JM:** You can't take it for granted any more.

**MR:** Yeah, it's changed a lot (*unintelligible phrase*).

**JM:** Right, yeah, that. . . . because I think at one time you could almost run anybody on a state scale, governor or what have you, and Lewiston almost guaranteed eighty percent of the vote, which would give you a huge margin, you know, in running. But I, it just doesn't happen any more. Not even in Waterville, or the, or even Biddeford I don't think runs that way any more. Mike, what else can I do for you?

**MR:** Well, are there any other political figures or people that you can think of that we might want to add to this list, or people that you knew that you can talk about for the '50s, '60s, '70s that were involved politically?

**JM:** That, you mean figures that I know of that. . . .?

**MR:** Yeah, maybe like Waterville people, or people that you knew through George or?

**JM:** I, you mean that you should talk to or I should talk about them?

**MR:** Or, yeah, both actually.

**JM:** See, I, most of the ones that I would know have passed on, the old timers. Oh, you know, somebody that you might, and would be interesting I think, would be Clayton Laverdiere. Have you had that name yet?

**MR:** I've heard of Laverdiere.

**JM:** Well, this is Clayton Laverdiere, who used to write for the *Waterville Sentinel*, who was a very good friend of Senator Muskie, who actually was one of the, when Senator Muskie was the, yeah, you probably don't want that on the tape. . . . (*noisy machine outside or something*)

(*Taping paused*)

**MR:** And what would you say Senator Muskie's legacy for Maine and Maine politics has been?

**JM:** Well I, my feelings are that Senator Muskie, the leader in environmental things, and Maine is such an environmental state, as is the country, and he was the champion of the cause. And, he actually was a giant in the eyes of at least most people in Waterville, and many people in Maine. And I think he obviously, as I've heard my brother say, played such a pronounced role in George's political philosophy and what have you. But I think generally speaking, it would take an outstanding person to outdo Senator Muskie as a great senator from Maine, but also a great

senator for the United States. And, but I think, for the whole I think the thing that impresses, at least in my case, Mike, would be that he did such wonderful things for the environment without costing the state jobs. He did it in such a nice way, and was persistent. And thank God George followed up on it in his stint in the senate. So, I think Muskie will always be enshrined in Mainers' hearts for many, many years as a great, great statesman.

**MR:** Okay, great, thanks a lot for your time.

**JM:** All right?

*End of Interview*