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Interview with Don Nicoll by Chris Beam

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee
Nicoll, Don

Interviewer
Beam, Chris

Date
November 13, 1991

Place
Portland, Maine

ID Number
MOH 019

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Biographical Note

Donald Eugene "Don" Nicoll was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on August 4, 1927, and grew up in the West Roxbury section of the city. He is the son of George and Mary Nicoll. He attended Robert Gould Shaw Junior High School and Boston English High School and graduated from Colby College in Waterville, Maine in 1949, majoring in History with a minor in Government. Don met his future wife, Hilda Farnum, also a Colby student, when they worked in the resort town of Ocean Park, Maine, in the summer of 1944. Nicoll began his graduate work at Pennsylvania State College in 1949, where he received a teaching fellowship in the Department of History. His graduate studies concentrated on American history, specifically the period from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War. His M.A. (1952) thesis was on the Alien and Sedition Acts.

Starting in 1951, Nicoll and his family settled in Buckfield, Maine where he picked apples and taught part time at Stephen's High School, located in Rumford. Nicoll began working as an announcer for WLAM radio in Lewiston, Maine. He became a reporter and then news editor for WLAM and WLAM-TV. In June 1954, Nicoll left WLAM to become Executive Secretary of the Democratic State Committee at the request of Frank M. Coffin, who has just become chairman. Mr. Coffin was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from Maine's Second Congressional District in 1956 and Nicoll went to Washington, DC, as his administrative assistant, continuing in that post until December 1960, the end of Congressman Coffin's second term. Mr. Coffin ran

for governor in 1960 and was defeated. After the election Senator Edmund S. Muskie asked Nicoll to join his staff as legislative assistant and news secretary. Nicoll served in that position until 1962, when he became administrative assistant. He continued in that post until 1971, when he became personal advisor to Senator Muskie. He left the senate office in mid-1972.

From 1972 until his retirement in 2005 Nicoll worked as a program and policy planner, first as a consultant (1972-73), then as chairman and chief executive officer of the New England Land Grant Universities Joint Operations Committee (1973-1975), then as coordinator of planning and vice president for planning and public affairs for the Maine Medical Center (1975-1986), then as a consultant (1986-2005). His clients were primarily in the non-profit sector and included universities, libraries, education associations, health care organizations and social service agencies. He also worked as a volunteer, heading a variety of public policy projects, including the Maine Task Force on Government Reorganization, the Maine State Compensation Commission, the Maine (Mental Health) Systems Assessment Commission, the Maine Consortium for Health Professions Education, the Southern Maine Community Television Consortium, the Maine Special Commission on Government Reorganization (co-chair), the Board of Visitors of the University of Southern Maine's Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, the Maine-Aomori Sister-State Advisory Council and the Governor's Allagash Wilderness Waterway Working Group.

From 1998-2005, Don Nicoll was the Director of the Edmund S. Muskie Oral History Project at Bates College.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: family background; Colby College; meeting his wife, Hilda; fellowship at Penn State; settling in Buckfield, Maine; background of parents; spending time in Nova Scotia as a child; being “left-handed”; Boston English High School; growing up in West Roxbury, Massachusetts; influential teachers; and early political influences.

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Transcript

Chris Beam: All right, this is an interview with Donald E. Nicoll in Nicoll's office in Portland, Maine, which takes place on November 13th, 1991 beginning at 10:11 a.m. Don, I want to talk, as I mentioned before, I want to talk not only about your work with Edmund Muskie, but also your own involvement in Maine and national politics and your own life and career. So, what I'd like to do is begin at the beginning and, you know, where you were born, where you were raised. I know you went to Colby College, how you began work as a journalist in Maine, and through your work with WLAM TV, I believe it was, or was it radio?

Don Nicoll: Radio first and then television.

CB: Radio and then television. You became involved with Ed Muskie's career and Maine Democratic Party politics. Let's start with the beginning. Where were you born and raised?

DN: I was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1927, August [4] of 1927, and was the only son of George and Mary Nicoll. My family came from Nova Scotia essentially, my mother was born and brought up there (my father's father and mother were natives of Nova Scotia) and they had met in Nova Scotia on the South Shore near where my mother lived. The family lived in West Roxbury, a section of Boston, and I grew up there, went to the public schools in Boston and graduated from English High School in June of 1945. Then went to Colby and studied there, my undergraduate major was American History and minor was government, as it was called in those days, and interestingly enough, my advisor at Colby was Paul Fullam, who later in 1954 ran for the United States Senate on the Democratic ticket in Maine. It was prior to attending Colby that I met Hilda [Farnum Nicoll], who worked in Ocean Park as I did in the resort area. She was a waitress in a restaurant in Ocean Park, and I . . . .

CB: This is in Massachusetts?

DN: No, this is in Maine. This is in, Ocean Park is an old section of Old Orchard which was established in the early 1880s by Baptists and has stayed pretty much a Baptist resort area, and we actually met by attending the young peoples' meetings connected with that.

CB: This is when you were in high school?

DN: I started when I was in high school and worked summers, first opening the camp in the spring after being a camper. I was working in a boy's camp in Ocean Park; she [Hilda] was working in the town. I'd gone there starting in 1940 and had been a camper, then a junior counselor, then a counselor and in addition working on the opening and then the closing of the camp beginning and the end of the season. And then the summer we met, summer of 1944, I was custodian of the, what was called euphemistically the service building, which is the toilets and showers, so I was cleaning toilets the summer I met Hilda. And then we happened to go to Colby, and this was not pre-planned. She was the daughter of Colby graduates and had grown up in Japan. Her father was a missionary and they had lived in Japan from 1927 until the end of 1940 when they returned before the end [***sic*** beginning] of the war.

CB: Oh, so they were right up almost to the beginning of the war with the U.S.

DN: Yes, as a matter of fact Hilda and her family have an interesting perspective on the surprise, in quotes, of Pearl Harbor because fully a year and a half before the outbreak of the war, the U.S. ambassador to Japan, Mr. Grew was warning American nationals to leave Japan and urging at least women and children to leave. Hilda's mother and Hilda and her two sisters left in November, late November of 1940. Her father left in April of 1941 on the last ship that sailed directly from Japan to the United States, and so they were aware that the likelihood of war was very high and the only surprise may have been the how and the when that it broke out. Her family lived in, had come from New England. Her father was a native of Medford, Massachusetts and her mother a native of Calais where Hilda had been born.

CB: Calais, Maine?

DN: Calais, Maine. And when she was two weeks old, they left Calais, went to Eastport and took the packet, the boat from Calais... from Eastport to Boston and thence took the train across the country and sailed from Vancouver, British Columbia, to Yokohama, Japan. The, her parents had been Colby graduates and ...

CB: This would be in what year?

DN: That she went to Japan?

CB: Yeah.

DN: Nineteen twenty-seven.

CB: Nineteen twenty-seven, okay.

DN: Hilda and I are actually twins, that is we were born on the same day.

CB: In the same year.

DN: In the same year; she in Calais and I in Boston. We discovered that after we met at Ocean Park. And at Colby we dated I guess starting in February of '46. We entered the fall of '45 and at the end of our senior year, a week after we graduated, we married. And I had in the meantime received a fellowship to Pennsylvania State College, as it was called in those days, for a one year non-renewable stipend teaching two sections of freshman American history in each semester, and for that I received a thousand dollars, and all fees were waived, and Hilda worked in the library there, and I was working on my masters degree.

CB: Now, this is Pennsylvania State College, is that now Penn State University?

DN: It's now Pennsylvania State University. By the time I got my masters degree in 1952, actually received the degree, it had become Pennsylvania State University. But at that time it was Pennsylvania State College.

CB: So, let me get the dating right here. You graduated from Colby in 1949?

DN: Forty-nine.

CB: Okay. And you were at Penn for three years? Was it three years?

DN: No, I taught, it was just one year. It was one year non-renewable, and I finished my course work in the summer of 1950. And at that time Hilda was pregnant and we had to find a way to support ourselves so we moved to New Jersey and I worked on my masters thesis which was the only thing remaining. And did that through the fall of '50 and into '51, and finally finished it up in the fall of '51, late fall of '51, and was awarded a degree in I guess it was January or February of 1952. The, and the thesis topic by the way was, "An Intellectual and Social Interpretation of the Alien and Sedition Laws of 1798." And I did a lot of my research at the New York Public Library and the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston, and found after leaving Penn State that I hadn't been very far sighted, which is a sad commentary on someone who ultimately became a planner, but I had not paid attention to the fact in my major, both at undergraduate level and particularly in the graduate school. Because of the war and the disruption in, disruptions in Europe and the Far East from the mid- to late 1930s on, no one had an opportunity to really study overseas, so anyone who was intent on becoming an historian concentrated on American history. And in 1950 when I had finished my resident requirements at Penn State and was looking for teaching opportunities, the American historians were a glut on the market and there were no opportunities for a guy with a baccalaureate degree and no master's degree. So we went first to New Jersey and I worked delivering laundry as a laundry route salesman while we, while I did my research on Saturdays and writing at odd times.

CB: Where in New Jersey were you?

DN: We were living in, for the most, most of that time in Hackensack, New Jersey.

CB: Why did you end up there?

DN: Hilda's folks lived in Tenafly and that was a convenient base and provided some security and it also was not too far from Penn State. I was going back there, and I forgot to mention earlier, I did some of my research at the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Historical Society.

CB: In Philadelphia?

DN: As well as the New York Public Library and the Massachusetts Historical Society. And we were there until September of '51 and in the meantime Hilda's folks had bought a home in Buckfield, Maine, about twenty miles northwest of Lewiston where they intended to retire in the mid-sixties. And they had come into a modest inheritance and decided to invest in the home for family reasons and they were going to use the home in the summers and said to us, if you would like to go to Maine and try your hand there, the house is there and use it.

CB: So you could occupy it until they're ready to retire, is that what the plan was?

DN: So in September '51 Hilda and our son Hugh who had been born the previous February ...

CB: February of 1950?

DN: Nineteen fifty-one.

CB: Fifty-one, right, February of '51.

DN: ... set out, went to Buckfield, Maine and settled in at the house right in the village and I spent that fall, the first of the fall, picking apples and teaching part time in the Rumford school system as a substitute teacher.

CB: Where, at Stephen's High?

DN: At Stephen's High School.

CB: Muskie's *alma mater*?

DN: His *alma mater*, and then, and knowing nothing about Ed Muskie at that point.

CB: Don, I'd like to, before we get too far into the future, I'd like to backtrack and get some more information on your own background. What did your father do for a living? You, both your parents were from Nova Scotia.

DN: That's right. My father had grown up in Readville, Massachusetts, which is a...

CB: Readville.

DN: Readville, Massachusetts.

CB: How do you spell that? I'm going to ask you for spellings for the record ...

DN: R-E-A-D-V-I-L-L-E. And Readville is a small section of Hyde Park, which in turn is a section of Boston, the city of Boston. It was the location of the Pullman car shops in the late 19th, early 20th century, at least until the '30s. The Pullman had car manufacturing operations in Readville. Readville was right on the main line of the railroad from Boston to New York, the line that goes down through Providence and along the Connecticut coast. His father, my father's father, was a painter by trade and worked in the Pullman shops as a painter, mostly varnishing, doing the fancy work on the interior of the Pullman cars. And my father had gone to Hyde Park High School, graduated from there, and his obvious interest was in the commercial program. And throughout his life I think he took the greatest pride in almost being an accountant and the kind of penmanship that went with office work in the early part of the century before heavy emphasis on typewriters and modern machinery. He became a painter early in his career with my father, my grandfather, and then a carpenter.

CB: Painter where, in the Pullman manufacturing outfit?

DN: No, they went to Virginia and he worked there for awhile, with his father.

CB: What kind of painter though?

DN: Construction, house painters.

CB: House painting, okay.

DN: Essentially house painting, and, which suggests that probably the Pullman shops closed in the mid-twenties, by the mid-twenties. And then they went to Philadelphia and worked on the old Ben Franklin Hotel and by then my father had become a carpenter and he was a carpenter for much of his life. He worked in Philadelphia, then they returned to Boston. He lived for almost a year in Philadelphia after he was married and then, and he and his father and mother came back to the Boston area.

CB: So your father's family moved first to Virginia, then to Philadelphia, and how old was he? Was he in his teens, early ...?

DN: In his early twenties.

CB: In his early twenties. But he wasn't married, is that correct?

DN: He was married in '25. And then ...

CB: Where?

DN: In Nova Scotia, in Port Clyde, Nova Scotia, which is in Shelburne County on the south

shore.

CB: Yeah, but when did, now, this is your father? Was he born, no, he wasn't born ...

DN: He was born in Merrimack, Massachusetts.

CB: Right, now how did he get back to Nova Scotia to get married?

DN: He went to visit, he went to visit relatives who lived in the town of Clyde River. This is ...

CB: Clyde? C-L-Y-D-E?

DN: C-L-Y-D-E, the epitome of New Scotland, Nova Scotia, New Scotland, and Port Clyde was just below the fall line on the Clyde River and was a fairly substantial boat building and shipping port. Not in a class with Yarmouth or Shelburne but fairly active in the last part of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century. And that's where my mother grew up. Her father was a carpenter, ship builder, sawyer, odd jobsman, later worked for the railroad as a station master in (*unintelligible word*), typical rural existence piecing together income. And she was, she and her sisters picked blueberries in the summer. And they picked blueberries in an area north, or inland, from Clyde River, which was the next town up the river, up the Clyde River, and where my father's family lived. And he went back to visit his cousins a couple of summers and while there they were picking blueberries, he went up and met my mother. I guess, the family story was that she was washing dishes in the stream when they met.

CB: Sounds like what happened to you later on.

DN: That's right, that's right. Except he was vacationing, he was at leisure and I was not. They, and they were married in '25 and married in Port Clyde, then took the train, Canadian National train from Port Clyde to Yarmouth and the Eastern Steamship overnight vessel from Yarmouth to Boston. And went from there to Philadelphia and lived for almost a year, then came back to Boston and they settled in West Roxbury where they lived for most of their married life.

CB: Now, how did your mother take leaving home? It seems like sort of a disruptive, very, almost a sudden disruption from rural small town Nova Scotia to Philadelphia and then Boston.

DN: I think she was eager to get out of Port Clyde. Port Clyde is a village of about two hundred people. She had gone to work for a store owner, literally running the store for him. At that time, in the early twenties, it would have been, yeah, just probably 1919, 1920, she left school early. My mother was a very stubborn and in some ways impetuous person and she got into a row with a teacher, left school and declared she'd never go back. I guess it tells you something about both the family situation and the way education was regarded for women in those days. The family did not insist that she go back to school, so she, she was about sixteen at that time, 1919, and I think by 1920 at the latest, she was working for R.D. Stoddard who was a boat builder by ...

CB: R.D. Stoddard?

DN: Stoddard, S-T-O-D-D-A-R-D. He was a boat builder by trade, but had started a small store on the side and she was the clerk and manager and bookkeeper for the store for several years until she married. And when I was a kid, I should note here, from the time I was a year old through 1938, every summer at the end of the school year, my mother took me and went to Nova Scotia and we spent the whole summer in Nova Scotia coming back just before ...

CB: But your father would stay back in Boston?

DN: He would stay in Boston and he would come for a week's vacation. And so part of my upbringing was Boston, suburban Boston, and then in high school right in the slums of the city where English was located. And part of my time, and a significant part of the year I was in rural Nova Scotia, both in Port Clyde, the Clyde River area, and nearer Yarmouth where an aunt and uncle lived on a farm.

CB: Now, how did you regard that? It must have been, did you regard this as a summer time fun, or was it such a change, I mean, did you develop friendships during this period?

DN: Oh, yeah. I had friends there, friends in Port Clyde, some in Clyde River, some of them were second, third cousins, and it had started before I was really conscious of how life was lived by a lot of people so that it was very natural. This was something that happened from the time I was a baby and as far as I was concerned, every summer you went to Nova Scotia.

CB: And where did you stay? Who did you stay with?

DN: We stayed with my grandfather and grandmother in Port Clyde, and I would visit for short times with my grandfather Nicoll and his wife, who was not my grandmother. My grandmother had died in 1929, a couple of years after I was born, and he had subsequently moved back to Nova Scotia in retirement and married a woman there and they lived in a very tiny house. So visiting them was more difficult and I would go and see them for overnight a couple of times in the summer. And then the rest of the time we spent with my aunt and uncle on their farm just outside Yarmouth for probably two to three weeks at a time, gathering hay, feeding the chickens, that sort of thing.

CB: Oh, so they'd put you to work when you were there.

DN: Oh, yes, you had some work to do, you had some work to do. But a lot of it was play time, picking berries, fishing, kid stuff, but no TV. No TV and no radio. My grandfather's house in Port Clyde had an electric generator and in part of, and he had a telephone, and electricity in part of the house, but most of the house we used oil lamps for light and no indoor plumbing. The only indoor plumbing in a sense was a pump in a little washroom where you got water for cooking and so forth, and there was an outside privy and thunder jugs for use at night. My ...

CB: Thunder jugs? What are those?

DN: Chamber pots.

CB: Oh, chamber pots, okay.

DN: Otherwise known as thunder jugs. And he had a car from as early as I can remember and I guess he'd had a car from the early twenties. My uncle, who had the farm, it was a fairly large farm, probably three or four hundred acres at least but much of it was in woodland. And he made his income from a combination of selling milk and they sold butter and eggs, and working on the town road and working for his father who had a saw mill across the road from where their farm was. They had no electricity. They did have a telephone, the old hand crank magneto phones, and they had no car. They had a team of horses and when you went to church on Sunday with them, it was in, you either walked or you rode in the light wagon that they had.

CB: Now, what you, your family is Scottish? Are they Scottish, or English, what's the ethnic background?

DN: My father's family was all Scottish. They had migrated from, I don't know the details about my grandmother Nicoll except that she was born in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, up in Guysborough County at the northern end of the ...

CB: Guysborough?

DN: Guysborough, G-Y, G-U-Y-S-B-O-R-O-U-G-H. That's a county in the northern, on the north shore of the main peninsula of Nova Scotia. And I don't know where in Scotland they came from. They were MacDonalds. My father's family had come from northeastern Scotland in 1854. They had sailed from Aberdeen directly to Nova Scotia and my guess is that they left at a time when the Scotch distilleries were in trouble, because my great-great-great-grandfather was a cooper by trade. And they lived in a place called Banff on the north shore which is just, oh, it's on the edge of the Speyside area which is where all the ...

CB: Bamff, B-A-M-F-F?

DN: As in Banff, Canada, but very different from Banff, Canada. It's on the northeast coast, bleak area, not many mountains around it and very near the concentration of distilleries along the Spey River. And they had migrated there and settled in Clyde River. My mother's family was English, mostly English, some Scottish ancestry. Her father came from Elgin, E-L-G-I-N, New Brunswick to Port Clyde. Her mother's family, Freemans, had been in Port Clyde, in that area for some time. And she was a descendant of loyalists who had lived in New York before the American Revolution and then had left and gone to Shelburne County in probably 1776-7, somewhere in there. So it's all, I've often joked that I knew what it was to be part of a minority because I grew up in a Protestant family in the midst of Irish Catholic section of Boston. Most of my chums growing up in Boston were members of the Holy Name Church in West Roxbury and I was known jokingly as a left hander.

CB: Left hander? Why?

DN: Left, well, technically speaking, a left hander is a Protestant Irishman.

CB: Oh, I see, I see.

DN: But I was generally referred to as left handed because I was a Protestant in the midst of this Catholic enclave. But my father's... you asked me earlier about my father and his work. He started out as a carpenter, then in the late twenties he worked for a grocery store first as a truck driver, deliveryman, and then he worked for the Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, later to be known as A & P, and became manager of one of their stores in West Roxbury. Then, I think it would have been in the early thirties, maybe as late as '33, '34, '35, somewhere in there, he was let go when the A & P Company moved from small stores to the first of what became the supermarkets. They weren't supermarkets as we know them today, but they were much larger and my guess is that he was not regarded as the kind of person who could manage that size operation. From that point on he worked at a succession of jobs. He was an insurance salesman for awhile, and in the depth of the Depression, in the late thirties, he was a night cashier for a cafeteria chain. It was Hunt's Lunch. And was a night cashier at the Dock Square Hunt's Lunch in Boston, right on, well, what is now the Faneuil Hall area. That whole section has changed dramatically, just across from the market section. Then he went back to carpentering. First, this would have been 193-, late '39, early 1940, he went to Alexandria, Virginia where there was a real push in housing development in connection with, both with the growth of the federal government during the Roosevelt era and the growth taking place because of the build up toward the war, and worked as a carpenter in some housing developments, as I've understood it from him. They were some of the what we later called garden apartments that were going up in that ...

CB: That's right, I've seen those, yes. Excuse me, Don, you stayed home and your mother stayed in Boston?

DN: Yeah, I had been very sick in '39, I had appendicitis in June and the appendix ruptured and I was in the hospital from early June until the middle of August. In those days there were no antibiotics and you simply were opened up and drained while nature took its course. So I had been quite sick that summer and was recovering in the fall and at that point he, looking for work, went to Alexandria. I think some friends of his had found the job, and worked there for probably, I don't think it was more than six or eight months. And then he came back because he was able to get a job in the Navy yard in Boston, and he worked in the Navy yard as a shipwright from 1940 until 1946. And he left the Navy yard when they cut back after the war, worked as a carpenter for a couple of companies for awhile, then went back to the Navy yard for awhile, and then was hired by Children's Hospital in Boston as a, first as a carpenter. And then he became supervisor of maintenance, in maintenance and security for the Children's Hospital, until he retired.

CB: And he retired when?

DN: He retired officially, it would have been, he was over sixty-five. I think it would have been around 1959, somewhere in there.

CB: And he was born when?

DN: No, sixty-nine. Nineteen sixty-nine. He was born in 1902. I always remember my father-

in-law was born in 1900, my mother-in-law 1901, my father in 1902, and my mother in 1903. So it was about '68, '69 when he retired.

CB: And what did your mother do during all this period?

DN: Well, she was a traditional housewife during much of, during the time I was growing up. After I went to college, she went to work as a bookkeeper at the Tremont Temple Baptist Church in Boston and worked there until she retired, which again was in the late '60s, early '70s. And she worked full time and then worked part time toward the end of that time.

CB: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

DN: No, I was an only child, spoiled brat.

CB: Okay, you went to Boston English High School. That's an elite high school, isn't it, in Boston?

DN: Well, not really. It's not an elite high school. It was the number two boys' school, and it's interesting today looking back as we hear all the debate about choice in education. In the 1930s and '40s in Boston, once you left junior high school, which was in the neighborhood as it were, you had a choice of where you went to high school in the school system. You could, if you were academically inclined and you wanted to work in a very strict classical education, go to Boston Public Latin School, which was the elite boys' school, and a similar choice was available to girls at Girls' Latin School. The second choice, for boys and girls, was Boys' or English High School and then Girls' English. The third choices were specialized schools: there was the school of commerce, the high school of commerce, there was the mechanic arts high school, which is now Boston Technical High School. And then there were, there was a boys' vocational and a girls' vocational school, and then there were several vocational programs at high schools scattered through the city. One school had a printing program, another one had auto mechanics, etc., and then there were regional high schools for general high school education.

English High was a very large school located right in the heart of the slums of Boston. And those of us who went from West Roxbury took what is now the Orange Line to Dover Street, and then walked down Dover Street to the high school, which had been built in the 1860s. And we joked that on Dover Street every other store was a pawn shop and the ones in between were barrooms, and it was not, not the best part of the city. The school drew boys from all over the city and had for those days a very diverse population, and higher than what I would have experienced minority population, what I would have experienced had I gone to Roslindale (*sp?*) High, which was the regional high school, and more diverse in socio-economic terms than Latin School, which tended to draw from middle class families.

We, it was a curious mix of intellectual educational opportunity and *laissez faire* attitude. You could either skim by in that high school or you could do very well. And if you were interested, you were pushed. If you were willing to do the work and sort of get along, they'd let you ride along and you could take either the college preparatory or commercial course, essentially, or general high school course. There were twenty seven hundred students in the school and in our

graduating class there were five hundred and twenty seven.

CB: For four grades.

DN: Yeah, four grades.

CB: Four classes.

DN: But most of us didn't enter until the tenth grade. Junior high went through ninth grade.

CB: Did you have a high school in West Roxbury that you could have chosen?

DN: Roslindale, which was right next to West Roxbury. Yes, could have chosen that.

CB: Why did you choose Boston English over Roslindale?

DN: I had had an opportunity in 1939 when I was in sixth grade to go to Boston Latin and had considered it and said, no, I didn't want to because I really didn't like the idea of the rather rigid and focused education there. Which may have been a sign of laziness, I don't know, but at least it did not appeal to me then. And then I was sick that summer, in fact before school let out, and didn't go back to school until February of 1940, and went to the Robert Gould Shaw [Junior] High School. Another aside here, at the Robert Gould Shaw [Junior] High School, there was a copy of the *bas relief* that stands on Beacon Street opposite the State House of Robert Gould Shaw leading the black troops of his regiment. I do not recall in my entire time at that school ever hearing anybody talk about or make the point about the reason for the name on that school and what Robert Gould Shaw's accomplishments were.

CB: Now there's a movie about it.

DN: Now there's a movie about it, now there's all the attention related to a review of the Civil War, but it's a sign of how insensitive, and how much people skimmed over it. The other thing is that there was rather limited mention of Brook Farm which was two miles from the school and was the center of intellectual ferment in that area of the city. But when I went back to junior high school in February of '40, I simply continued through the ninth grade and then wanted to get a challenging high school education, and I suspect I was pushed by teachers to go to English. I still was not interested in Latin. I had several friends who were at Latin and my impression was that their education at the time was focused on a very rigid curriculum. I didn't phrase it in those terms, obviously, at that age, but I had the sense that they were grinding away and life wasn't terribly interesting for them, and English was much more appealing as a good high school where I could concentrate on education. And as it turned out, it was a marvelous social education as well as an intellectual education. Personally, I'm sure you know because I saw your name recently in the Maine Progressive in an article that you'd written, Herschel Sternlieb, the editor's husband, was a classmate of mine.

CB: Oh, is that right:?

DN: And Herschel and I grew up in that high school, which was a rich source of ethnic and socio-economic diversity.

CB: Now, what kind of neighborhood did you grow up in? Now, Roxbury is now in the Black community of Boston. What sort of area was it when you were growing up in the late '30s?

DN: Well, I was in West Roxbury which is different from Roxbury. West Roxbury is on the fringe of the city and, on the southwest fringe of the city, right next to Dedham and the Charles River. It was known jokingly as the home of teachers, policemen and firemen. It was where people in the middle class tended to migrate ...

End of Side One
Side Two

DN: .. the city. And the next community was Dedham which was a separate town. West Roxbury was real suburbs, not very many multi family houses. In some parts of the city two-family houses, matter of fact most of the, from the time I was born until 1940, we lived in two-family houses. My parents rented. And then in 1940 they found a single house to rent and lived there. And from that time on they lived in single homes. But most of the time ...

CB: But they were renters throughout your life?

DN: They were renters, they did not buy a home until 1950, '51. They, in fact they didn't own a car until 1947. But West Roxbury was a community of frame houses. It had its own identity. It was on the, a suburban rail line and also on a trolley line, the main forms of transportation. And it was largely Irish and Yankee with a small number of Jewish families and a small but identifiable population of Syrian and Lebanese families. And it has changed; it's more heavily settled now and the inevitable disruption of the commercial section of the community because of the growth of malls and the changes as a result of traffic. And many of the open wooded areas where we played as kids now have been developed. The population as I have observed it in recent years going to the area is somewhat more diverse but still heavily white Irish and Yankee probably. The Dorchester - Roxbury area was blue collar, more intensely, more intensely blue collar than West Roxbury and I had two aunts, two sets of aunts and uncles who lived in that area, and there was again a more diverse population. More Italian and middle European families there, and a few Black families and in sections of Dorchester much more heavily Jewish population.

Now, many of the families that lived there of course have moved out and it's become heavily Black and Asian, the inevitable migration of lower income people looking for opportunities for housing and the middle income people looking for more space. And a number of, no, none of my family is in the city now. I have a couple of cousins who moved out of the city and into the suburbs. I do have one cousin and her husband who still live in West Roxbury, and another cousin there, older than I by ten years or so, they lived in West Roxbury until one cousin died and her husband, her widower, moved out. But the other cousin still lives there. But the younger cousins all scattered to what used to be the ex-urbs. When I, but when I was growing up, West Roxbury was pretty... except for religious differences, was essentially a mono culture.

CB: Really? Despite the ethnic diversity?

DN: Well, the ethnic diversity wasn't that great. You had mostly Irish and Protestant, and if you eliminated the questions of religious difference, then there was no real difference in terms of general societal attitudes or economic status, and ...

CB: Because in Boston the Irish and the English Protestants had a history of conflict. But had that abated by the time you were growing up?

DN: Yeah, and you did not see it in its starkest form in West Roxbury because, I referred earlier to reference of that as a place where the policemen, firemen and school teachers lived, it was also referred to as an area where the "lace curtain Irish" lived, as distinct from the "shanty Irish" who lived in South Boston. And the Irish families who lived in South Boston and Dorchester and Roxbury were the ones who were the excluded ones. The folks who lived in West Roxbury had made it, and they were, and by that time they were part of the power structure. Mayor Curley was the mayor I remember growing up. And many of the school teachers ...

CB: That's James Curley?

DN: James Michael Curley.

CB: James Michael Curley, right.

DN: And he was the mayor I remember most, and the city council leaders, the members of the school committee were mostly Irish politicians, that I was aware of, and the policemen, firemen, the school teachers, many were Irish. And I remember, well, one of the people who I remember most as a kid was, well, two people: Father Leonard who was the priest in charge of youth work at Holy Name Church; and, I encountered him through playing sand lot baseball and football as a kid near where we lived; and Frances Finnerty who was a policeman at the local police station and ran the police youth programs. And I, we went, my family attended the Baptist church in West Roxbury so I had that life, Sunday school and church and the youth groups. And then I had my school life which was focused in the broader community and most of my friends and acquaintances there tended to be Roman Catholics, tended to be Irish, and that was not really very different in fact from the families I associated with otherwise. There was the artificial religious distinction, but it really was artificial. But then when you went into the city, you found the people who tended to be excluded or held down. This included the Jewish families, the Middle Eastern families, middle European families, and particularly the Blacks, and then a small cluster of Oriental families, principally Chinese, what is still China town. And at English High, that mix that represented in a sense the coming city, was much more concentrated. And it was a much rougher environment in a sense.

CB: At English High School?

DN: At English High School.

CB: Oh, really? You mean there was a lot of antagonism about, was the school, was the student body fragmented by ethnic group, or socio-economic?

DN: Not really. I wasn't aware of it at least. No. I'm sure there were ...

CB: So why was it a rougher environment?

DN: Well, rougher because it was of very different socio-economic backgrounds and people, the veneer wasn't there. Growing up in West Roxbury, there was a lot of veneer. Things were much more genteel than they were at English. It was not a dangerous place ...

CB: Did it make, you say it was dangerous?

DN: No, it was not a dangerous place. Simply a little rougher environment.

CB: Did you find that disconcerting at all, or did you adjust to it?

DN: I found it quite exciting . . . .

CB: Oh, really.

DN: I had a good time at that school.

CB: How did you do academically? You must have done fairly well to get into Colby, at English High School.

DN: Well, I did well at English High, and was, won honors in history and English and I think was generally regarded as a very good student, and my, I participated a lot in public speaking contests during that period, and ...

CB: Was this the debating program or was there a public speaking program?

DN: No, there's no, there was a debating program. I never got into the debating program but participated in different straight public speaking contests and was also in, at graduation I gave the student graduation speech as salutatorian. I was not the top, I was not valedictorian, not the top student in the school by any means. And one of my funny memories of high school was that they had a series of prizes, I think they were called the Lawrence Prizes, for achievement in different fields, English, history, mathematics, physics, chemistry. And in my senior year I won the Lawrence Prize in physical education. Anybody who knows Nicoll knows that that is a very strange award for him to get. But for some reason the director of the athletic program, William Ohrenberger, O-H-R-E-N-B-E-R-G-E-R, who later became superintendent of schools in Boston, thought that I had some leadership quality apparently, and picked me out to lead the calisthenics program. And during the war there was a heavy emphasis on calisthenics in our minuscule gymnasium, so I spent I don't know how many periods a week leading calisthenics for this massed crew, and got the prize for physical education. And I was not an athlete, and the real athletes, the Herschel Sternliebs, and ...

CB: Oh, was he an athlete?

DN: Oh yes, he is a great runner. I think he was quarter miler. I remember him primarily in his relay races. Yeah, Hershel was a splendid runner and splendid student. But I, no, I found that school challenging and fun and educationally very stimulating. I'm sure that I lost some things by not having some of the discipline that went along with Public Latin School, but I always felt that I gained much more in terms of a combination of stimulating intellectual curiosity and questioning conventional wisdom, which you had to do there, and the exposure to people with very different experiences. And it served me well. I wish, I wish everyone had a chance for that kind of public school education. Then the other thing during that period, I decided that I wanted to be a minister, which is probably one of the reasons I focused on public speaking rather than debating, and I thought through the early years of my college education that I was going to become a minister. In fact, while at Colby I preached at a church in what's called Riverside, Maine, just north of Augusta. It's part of Vassalboro. In a little country church, did that right through from middle of my freshman year until just before graduation. But I decided by the time I was in my, oh, the end of my junior year that that was not for me. My religious views were beginning to change and have changed to the point where ultimately I became an agnostic.

CB: Was that the main reason, or were there other aspects of the ministry you didn't, didn't appeal to you? The pastoral work and so forth?

DN: No, the pastoral work, relating to people and dealing with moral issues attracted me, but increasingly I became uncomfortable with the theology and decided that was not something I wanted to pursue. And the big influence on me that pushed me in the direction of a career as an historian, as I thought I was headed for, was Paul Fullam who was the chairman of the department.

CB: Was he history or government?

DN: He was history, history and government. It was a mix in those days, it really was a department of history and government and members of the faculty taught both history and government but Paul was primarily an historian.

CB: Now, your family, did your mother or father or both encourage you in stressing academic work in high school, at Boston English, and then going on to college? I mean, I mean you seem to have developed a strong academic bent. I mean, what was the source of that?

DN: I think it was a combination of ambition on my mother's part and probably to a certain degree on my father's part. She was a much more hard driving person for herself and for me than my father. He was on the whole a very easy person and a, someone who had no great drive to be a worldly success, if you will. He obviously threw himself into a lot of activity, mostly people related. He loved working with people.

CB: You mean in terms of extra curricula activities?

DN: Extra curricula, working in the church, working with groups when he was at the Children's Hospital, he was very active with the bowling league and working with employees and voluntary activities. He was committed to voluntary work, but hadn't the foggiest about a career and drive. That wasn't what moved him. My mother was much tougher and much harder driving, probably much more acute in her intellectual capacities than my father. He was intelligent but not, he didn't have many intellectual interests. And my mother's interests found expression largely in things like doing crossword puzzles. She loved crossword puzzles, Scrabble, that sort of thing. Not a great reader outside of religious work.

CB: Now, were your parents strongly religious, either one of them?

DN: Yeah, they were conventionally very religious, participating in the church and very active until their, well, my father's final illness and death and my mother's coming to Maine to a nursing home after she became very ill. But they were very active and the church was their social life. Almost their entire focus and social life was the church itself and the activities in the church or people they knew through the church. [They had] very limited exposure outside other than my father's work at the Children's Hospital.

CB: What did he do at the Children's Hospital?

DN: He started as a carpenter and then he became supervisor of carpentry and the maintenance, and then he became supervisor of maintenance and security, and then he was, after, he was sixty five and he was tapering off but still not retired, he was a special activities director. But he was, it was his people skills that they were obviously calling on.

CB: Now, was your mother active outside the home, say, in church work?

DN: Yes, very active in church work and a member of different societies. She was a teacher in Sunday school, was, I guess at one time she may have been superintendent of the Sunday school, sang in the choir, my father sang in the choir. He was treasurer for a number of years, was on the board of deacons, that sort of thing. You asked me about, why did I focus on an academic career? I think in part it was ambition for me by my mother pushing me toward a getting out of the very chancy life of being a blue collar worker, or some of the activities that my father had tried. And the ministry in particular was something that was appealing, both because of religious feelings, identification with the church, and seeing it as a way out of the blue collar work. I thought I... my guess is, my guess is that much of the challenge for me, and much of the push for me in terms of an academic career came very largely from teachers in school, and I was... I guess one would have to say that I was a fairly bright kid and teachers pushed me. At one point they wanted me to skip a grade, when I was in first grade they wanted me to skip from first to third, and my parents said no. I think they were wise in terms of social development. But I remember during the, during grammar school and then junior high and then in high school, a number of teachers really keeping after me and pushing me and encouraging me to think of going on. I had a history teacher, an English teacher who was also my home room teacher in high school, and an American history teacher who pushed very hard, and a physics teacher.

CB: Do you remember their names?

DN: Mr. Hayes was my home room teacher who was an English teacher ...

CB: H-A-Y-E-S?

DN: ... E-S. And Cecil McElroy, capital M-C-E-L-R-O-Y, was the American history teacher. And then there was a wonderful physics teacher. Louis, L-O-U-I-S, Welch, W-E-L-C-H who also pushed me very hard. And I can remember several teachers in grammar school and junior high. I'd have to go back on a couple of them for their names, but I can see them and remember the kind of stimulation. One of the things that those of us who were born in the mid to late twenties benefited from the Depression and from the discrimination against women. The Depression meant that a number of very bright people who might have gone into business careers went into teaching instead.

CB: There were no cutbacks in the teaching, schools?

DN: No, they needed the teachers. Pay wasn't very high but it was adequate and it had security. And women were discriminated against and could only find opportunities as school teachers and nurses, so you got some very bright women, particularly in the elementary and junior high school levels, and some very bright men. Men on the faculty at English High School, who were, there were several Ph.D.s, a number of them had master's degrees, and they were very bright, very able. And when they found somebody who was responding, they pushed very hard. I've always maintained that those of us who grew up in that period gained a lot from the ills of our society educationally. There are some advantages to adversity.

CB: So how did the Depression affect you? I mean, you were aware of course that the Depression was going on, and your father had to move to Alexandria, Virginia, to find work at one time, but other than that how did it affect you? Did it affect your, any developing political or social attitudes?

DN: No, it, I think underneath it did, but in obvious ways, not at all. I remember that, well, my mother's family was very liberal, at least her father was a Liberal in Canada ...

CB: You mean a member of the Liberal Party?

DN: Yeah, and he was in a minority in that part of Nova Scotia. And I remember going there in the mid-thirties and my father was there and they had an election. It was the election I think where McKenzie King was elected prime minister. The Liberals won so he became prime minister. And my grandfather, my father happened to be there at the time. My father and I went out on a truck with a bunch of Liberals riding up and down the country roads and they would stop at Tories' homes, conservatives' homes, and go up and bang on the door and just rub it in that the Liberals had won until finally one of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police came along and said, go home, stop disrupting the neighborhood. But apparently my grandfather was a very active Liberal and talked politics constantly and totally turned his daughters off from politics.

My father's family apparently was fairly conservative, even though they were working class.

And I grew up in a setting where the one effect of the religious differences was expressed in being at least nominal Republicans, my mother in particular although she didn't become a citizen until the forties. But she was anti-Democratic because Democrats were James Michael Curley and that sort of thing, and my father was an enrolled Republican, and a number of family friends were Republicans. In fact I remember as a kid -- probably it would be illegal today -- I went around collecting signatures for a friend of the family who was running for the legislature, getting signatures on his nominating petition, being paid ten cents a signature. But up through 19-, I think it was probably about through 1941, in that period, if anybody asked me what party I supported, it was the Republican Party, and I was in a minority in that setting. I remember thinking I was supporting Landon and then Wendell Willkie in 1940, and then during the war I became much more attuned I guess, or influenced to support the Democrats. And I discovered subsequently that my father was really a Democrat underneath it all. In '48, much to my mother's consternation, he voted for Harry Truman, and he may have voted for Roosevelt earlier than that. But it was during high school, I think, that I really started to shift.

CB: Now, was there much discussion of politics in your family? I mean between your mother and father, or between your parents and you? I mean about, even about local politics or national politics?

DN: Not very much. I'll come back to that. I'm going to have to take a break.

CB: Okay. (*After break*) So, we were talking, Don, about your own family's interest, or maybe lack of interest in politics.

DN: I think it was lack of interest. And I often think these days as I hear conversations about politicians and the negative attitude toward politicians, that that's the kind of environment in which I grew up. And I don't know of any of my relatives who had any interest in politics in those days and very limited discussion at home. All I can remember generally is disparaging comments about Curley and the Democrats in Massachusetts. Or remember some very favorable comments about Governor Leverett Saltonstall who was a Yankee Republican, therefore acceptable in the family and in the church, and the church was quite conservative, Republican. Again, a church made up of a mix of middle class and working class people, not a wealthy church, but their choice of party was largely dictated by ethnic and religious prejudice essentially.

CB: What about comments on Roosevelt or the New Deal or any of the more national issues?

DN: Generally, um, mildly negative about Roosevelt, mildly critical of the New Deal, although I remember, I remember two kinds of comments. One, when my father was still manager of the A & P store, he had the NRA signs, the NRA eagle signs ...

CB: That's the National ...

DN: ... Recovery Administration. And he was very proud of those and those were put up as an effort to support the administration. So my guess is that during that period at least he was very supportive of Roosevelt and the Democrats. The other thing that I heard at home were

disparaging comments about the WPA, the Works Progress Administration referring to it as We Poke Along, the phrase that was used. And I also remember as a child sometime in the late spring it would have been, or early fall, selling lemonade, making lemonade and selling it at a WPA road project right near our house. And so obviously there were a lot of WPA efforts going on in the area and people were employed in it so I think that there were probably ambivalent feelings, hating to give anything to the Democrats and at the same time recognizing the need for the programs in the thirties. The other things I remember politically during that period are: one, that there was a lot of stimulation of political discussion in school. And a member of the city council, a man named Clement Norton, who was in the city council for years and years and years, used to come regularly to our junior high, to our grammar school and speak, and they'd have assemblies and he spoke about government and politics. Then around the time of elections a lot of effort put in by the teachers to have the students talk about the elections and the issues and the candidates and a lot of effort to have mock debates, etc.

CB: This was in grammar school?

DN: This was in grammar and then junior high school. Then the other thing I remember, just snatches, it didn't strike me until later, in the fifth grade a teacher, no sixth grade, it was the sixth grade, a teacher who talked about Mussolini making the trains run on time. And obviously a fairly conservative person who looked on Mussolini, and probably Hitler at that time, as answers to social disorganization and disruption. But that's the only note I remember along those lines. And then of course during the war there was a lot of support of the national government. And by the time I got to college I think essentially I'd become a Democrat. And in fact by 1948 and the election of that year I was unhappy about Truman and unhappy about the Korean conflict which was just getting under way and voted for Norman Thomas, a Socialist, for president.

CB: In '48?

DN: In '48.

CB: But not Henry Wallace?

DN: Not Henry Wallace, I voted for Norman Thomas in '48. The, but it was a kind of gradual evolution for me, and increasing differences in interest, intellectually and in terms of politics and religion ultimately, very different from my parents. I was just moving steadily away.

CB: Now, how did they regard this evolution, or were they aware of it?

DN: I don't think they were fully aware of it until I let them know when I was in college that I was not going to go on in the ministry and my mother was deeply hurt and upset by that. It took her quite awhile to get over it. The political differences didn't matter as much, we didn't discuss them a lot, and it was just a difference of opinion on occasion. And my father, as I say, was a closet Democrat for a long time. Then it was a real problem for my mother, I think, when I went to work for the Democratic Party in Maine. Not that I was working for the Democratic Party, but I was, what was I doing giving up a good job with the radio and television station to go off into this crazy business ...

CB: Well, was it because she associated the Democrats with the kind of politics found under Mayor Curley? After all, he spent time in jail, didn't he?

DN: Oh, yeah. Well, it's a bit of that but it's also a bit of regarding politics in general as not very savory. And not a secure career. There was very ambivalent feelings, I'm sure, about a son who was apparently doing exciting and different things and was a, quote, success, and what kind of uncertain business was he involved in. And one has to remember, too, in thinking about the ambivalent attitude of parents in that situation, in my generation on, in my father's family and my mother's family, there were only two of us who went on to full college programs.

CB: You mean among your relatives, cousins and so forth? And you numbered, about how many people are you talking about?

DN: I'm talking about fifteen to twenty, somewhere in there.

CB: And just two of you went on to college?

DN: ... and I was the only one that went on to, I had one cousin who went to business school, Bentley College, but it was at that time an associate degree program; one cousin who went to Northeastern, graduated, later was sports editor of the Boston Globe; and one cousin who was a nurse, but a diploma nurse, later got advanced training; and I; that was it. And nobody before us in either family had gone beyond high school, and most of them hadn't graduated from high school. So it was not, so if you went that far, you'd achieved some level of success and doing the right thing, but then the career shifts scared the daylights out of them.

CB: Now, what decided, why did you go to Colby College? I mean, what got you interested in Colby as, and what other schools did you consider and so forth?

DN: As I recall, I looked at, I considered three schools. One was Colby, one was Bowdoin, and one was Acadia University in Nova Scotia. My mother was interested in that.

CB: Arcadia?

DN: Acadia. A-C-A-D-I-A, in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. And it was really a question of a four year baccalaureate college that had some religious connection with the Baptists at the time, because I was thinking of going on in the ministry. And my principal advisors at the time were the minister of the church, and in high school. I can't remember much pressure in terms of a specific school, so it was almost the path of least resistance into a reputable small liberal arts college. The other thing, there were two other things, I think, that motivated me in making the choice. One was that after three years in a very large, all male high school, I was interested in a much smaller environment and also interested in a coed situation.

CB: So that would have eliminated Bowdoin.

DN: That would have eliminated Bowdoin and it also eliminated, well, that, and I wanted to go

away to school, I did not want to be at home.

CB: You didn't want to go to a school in Boston?

DN: Yeah, so that eliminated Harvard, B.U., Tufts, etc. And I settled on Colby and my grades were good enough so that I zipped in. And of course in that time, one shouldn't presume too much about my qualifications, at that time it was right at the end of the war, there weren't very many men around and they were looking for students and particularly males. So it was a fairly easy slide. And because of my earlier medical history I was 4F and simply rejected by the Armed Services for the war.

CB: Did you, were you ordered for ...?

DN: I was drafted.

CB: Oh, you were drafted, or you were ordered for a physical.

DN: I went for the pre-induction physical and it was, it's another amusing example of what happens. I was, I graduated in June of '45, made plans to go to college in the fall, assumed that under no circumstances would the Armed Services have any interest in me with the medical history. And I was going away for the summer to work at Ocean Park, and before leaving I said, it's ridiculous for me to have to come back at some point this summer for a pre-induction physical just to be told that I'm not fit, and cost the government the money to, it will cost to put me through that, so I went ...

End of Interview