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Interview with Carole Parmelee by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Parmelee, Carole

Interviewer

Nicoll, Don

Date

February 27, 2001

Place

Washington, D.C.

ID Number

MOH 261

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Biographical Note

Carole Ann Parmelee was born in Columbus, Ohio on February 4, 1944. Her mother, Marie (Jackman) Clemens, was a homemaker, and her father, Vernon, was a factory worker in a steel mill. Both of her parents were democratic supporters and her father was an organizer in the steel union. After high school she attended Otterbein College and first became politically active in the local Kennedy campaign. In 1970 she founded and became president of the Northeast Columbus Democratic Women's Club and worked on John Gilligan's campaign staff and eventually worked as a staff member until 1974 when Gilligan lost re-election. She met her second husband, Ken, and the two began working for Governor Dan Walker of Illinois. She later moved to Washington, D.C. and worked for Howard Metzenbaum for a short period of time, and then joined Senator Muskie's staff, first as a legislative assistant to Jim Case and then as a personal assistant to Muskie doing scheduling and advance work. She continued as his personal assistant when he left public office and joined the law firm of Chadbourne & Parke, during the time he served on the Nestle Infant Formula Audit Commission (NIFAC). At the time of this interview, Parmelee was working with Leon Billings at the Muskie Foundation, an organization created to further Edmund S. Muskie's lifelong commitment to public service, civic responsibility, and the protection of the natural and human environment.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: family history; education and political background; Northeast Columbus Democratic Women's Club; John Gilligan's campaign and career; work in Governor Dan Walker's office; move to Washington; working for Harold Metzenbaum; working for Muskie; and the camaraderie in Muskie's office.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: It is Tuesday, the 27th of February, the year 2001. We are in the offices of the Muskie Foundation in Washington, D.C. and Don Nicoll is interviewing Carole Parmelee. Carole, would you state your full name and spell it for us, and give us the date and place of birth?

Carole Parmelee: Carole Ann Clemens Parmelee. I was born in Columbus, Ohio and my birth date, as the only way I could teach my husband to remember it, is 2-3-44.

DN: And what were your parents' names, Carole?

CP: Vernon and Marie Clemens. My mother's maiden name was Jackman.

DN: And had they been natives of Ohio?

CP: They were both natives of Ohio, both natives of central Ohio, right in the Columbus, Ohio, area.

DN: And did you have brothers and sisters?

CP: I have one brother, he's three years younger than I am and still lives in Delaware, Ohio.

DN: And what was your father's occupation?

CP: My father was a factory worker, he worked as a foreman at a steel sheet metal company that made rolling doors.

DN: And was your mother -?

CP: She was a homemaker.

DN: She was a homemaker. And did you grow up going to schools in Columbus?

CP: I did, I did, I went to elementary school, went to high school both in Columbus, Ohio. And spent some time at Otterbein College which was not far from Columbus, Ohio.

DN: Did you go through to graduation?

CP: I did not, I did not.

DN: Did you, well let's talk about your family first. Was your father, or were your father and mother active in politics?

CP: My mother, they were always strong Democrats and always worked on a local level for the local candidates, so I could say in that way they were. They probably were not what you would call activists.

DN: Was your dad involved in union activity?

CP: Yes, very much so.

DN: This the steel workers?

CP: Um-hmm, um-hmm, he was indeed. I can remember him going to lots of union meetings. In fact I do believe in the early days he was an organizer. My dad retired unfortunately early on disability, because he had multiple sclerosis. So in my junior high, high school years I don't

remember him being as active in politics as he was when I was much younger.

DN: Did that have a serious economic effect on your family?

CP: It did. Serious, probably not serious, but certainly affected it, certainly.

DN: And after high school you went off to college for a time.

CP: I did, it was during, well it was in the early sixties and I was engaged at that point to my first husband. He was not in college. The Vietnam War came along and we had a couple of choices. I'm not sure, in hindsight, that it was the correct one but we decided to be married which changed his classification, and then we could not afford both of us to go to college.

DN: So he went to college and you -

CP: So, he did. And I always intended to go back, but as I have said, I think I got my degree in political science the hard way, by real experience in the school of hard knocks.

DN: And the effective way.

CP: Yeah, I think so, I think so.

DN: And was this, in the Columbus area still, was he at the same college?

CP: Ohio State.

DN: Ohio State. And how long did that last?

CP: The marriage?

DN: The marriage.

CP: The marriage lasted for two children and nine years.

DN: And did you leave the Columbus area at that point, or -?

CP: No, I would, that's really the time when my political career began. When I was divorced I became very active in Democratic politics, and became the founder and eventually the president of the Northeast Columbus Democratic Women's Club. And [I] was active in the campaign of Jack Gilligan, John Gilligan, who was a Cincinnati congressman running for governor of the state of Ohio. And he was elected in 1970 and I went to work for him. I did scheduling and advance for four years until he was defeated in 1974; one of the, if not the only, Democratic governor that was defeated in that Watergate year. There were several, we could go into a lot of reasons why he was defeated, but there was a budget crisis in Ohio during that time and he chose, as one of the methods to deal with it, to close the national parks, or the state parks, which was not well received at all.

DN: Were you on the governor's staff at that point?

CP: I was, I was, for the four years he was governor.

DN: And you were doing scheduling during that time, too.

CP: And advance.

DN: What led you into politics before that?

CP: My aunt, my mother's sister had been a Democratic poll worker all of her life, and I always thought that was fascinating and so she would drag me along to Election Day. And I always decided that I would like to do that when I grew up. And then of course like everyone my age, John Kennedy really, I think, was the turning point and I found him someone that I just had to be involved with, and became very active in the local Ohio campaign there.

DN: That was at the age of sixteen.

CP: That's right, that's right. I was still in high school, still in high school.

DN: When you did that. And were you active in the party through the years in college and then ... ?

CP: I was, which brought some concern in the family because my husband at that time was a very active Republican.

DN: Did you have fierce debates over politics?

CP: We had fierce debates, yes, we did indeed, we did indeed. He was a big Nixon supporter.

DN: And what happened after Governor Gilligan was defeated?

CP: During the time I was in the governor's office I met Ken, who had run the campaign for the lieutenant governor in Indiana, Dick Bodine (*sounds like*), who was running for governor. Dick lost, Ken came to Ohio, and in Ohio we met, we dated for two years and were married in '73. Ken, when he came to Ohio, worked for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, and actually he was a candidate recruitment person for the state legislature. When Jack Gilligan was defeated, we gave the governor, as many did, our resumes, and he was on his way to a governor's conference, took our resumes. Both Ken and I were called by Governor Dan Walker from Illinois. And so we moved to Springfield, Illinois and worked for Dan Walker.

DN: What did Ken do?

CP: Ken was the, was it the chairman? Ken was the chairman of the governor's task force on water control, and I worked as the assistant scheduler for the governor. And during the end of

Governor Walker's years, I spent a lot of time in Chicago coordinating women's groups. Sad end of the story is Governor Walker lost.

Ken had worked early in his career for Vance Hartke, senator from Indiana. Vance at this point invited Ken to come back to the state of Indiana and be his finance director for his '76 campaign. I was asked to work for the Indiana Democratic state committee, which I did. So we both accepted those jobs, moved back to Indianapolis, Indiana. So we'd gone from Columbus to Springfield to Indianapolis. In Indianapolis working for the Indiana Democratic Party, I ran the campaign for a young state senator named Graham Richard, who was just elected mayor of Fort Wayne, Indiana last year. And Graham, at the time, was a state senator running for superintendent of public construction, and that was an elected office on the Indiana state ballot. Unfortunately Graham lost and Vance Hartke lost.

At this point, however, fortunately, Jimmy Carter won. So Ken and I both being kind of political junkies decided this is the time to go to Washington, it's where we always wanted to go. So that's how we got to Washington.

DN: And what did you do when you came to Washington?

CP: Well, we, on the way to Washington, dropped our daughters off at my mother's in Columbus, came to Washington without a job, without a place to stay, and I would never do that again but at that age, you know, it was exciting. I started to work almost immediately for Howard Metzenbaum, who was the senator from Ohio and did again scheduling, for him. Before I started working for him, however, I had put my resume with various people on the Senate side and the House side.

And shortly after, I think I'd been in Metzenbaum's office probably less than a month, who called me? Leslie Finn called me from the Senator's office and wanted to know if I was still interested in talking to the Muskie staff. And I said, "Absolutely. I would like to come down and talk to you." So I did, and was offered a job by Jim Case and Bob Rose to work for either one of them. And I can remember Leslie saying, "Well, you know, they both would like you, who would you prefer to work for? I mean, do you want to work in press or legislation?"

And I worked with Jim Case and was there with Jim probably, as an LA, for maybe three months. And during that time Dolores Stover, the Senator's personal assistant, had left the office and gone to work for Jim Sasser. And the Senator had hired another woman, I don't know what her name was, I can't remember it right now, but she didn't work out well and actually ended up taking an overdose of sleeping pills. And at that point Charlie Micoeau, who was the administrative assistant, said, "Carole, would you be at all interested in working for the Senator personally doing, you know, give background and scheduling and advance? Would you like to consider that?" And I said, "Sure."

So I hung around for weeks before they could find a ten minute spot for me to go in and interview with the Senator. Each day I'd get ready, clothes on, you know, 'what am I going to say to him?' In the office you didn't really meet him casually or easily. I mean, he would do a walk through at Christmas time and say "Merry Christmas", and walk through before the August

break and say “have a nice summer”. But you did not really casually run into the Senator. So I was quite excited and nervous to meet him.

DN: This is 1977?

CP: This was ‘77, January ‘77. Maybe February. And finally I, you know, Charlie called and said, “He has five minutes. Can you come talk to him right now?” And I said, “Sure.” So I went in, sat down, and he looked at me, and of course I’m terribly intimidated. And he said, “Well, what can you do for me?” And I had all of these other things ready to show him and to talk to him about, and I thought, ‘well, what can I do for him?’ And I said, “I believe I can do whatever you need to have done, and I can also,” (because I understood this was an important thing for him), I said “I also think that I can make your life more manageable in and out of the office, and would enjoy doing so.” And he said, “Umph. Well, if you can do that, no one else can.” So he said, “If you’re willing to give it a try, I am.” And I said, “Certainly.” So that’s how I was hired, very low key and very unglamorous, but that’s where it started.

DN: How did you feel as you left the office that day?

CP: I talked to Charlie and said, “Charlie, you didn’t actually prepare me for it.” And he said, “Well, hey,” he said, you know, “there’s no way I can prepare you for an interview with Ed Muskie,” he said, “but you did very well, he was pleased.” And I said, “Well, that’s good to know.” And I thought

DN: What did you tell Ken that night?

CP: I told Ken what I was doing, and of course he was very excited because Ken is very, well he’s as political as I am and he’s as much of a political junkie as I am and he was excited. I mean, Ed Muskie was Ed Muskie and very, you know, very well respected. And if you were going to work in the Senate and you were going to work for long, long hours every day, you know, the real joy is to work for someone that you believe in and that is a real power and a mover and shaker, and he certainly was that. So Ken was very excited, and I was too, I was too.

DN: I’d like to drop back a little bit and ask you about Ken’s educational background and professional activity.

CP: Certainly. Ken grew up in Gary, Indiana. His father was an attorney and ran the Gary Housing Authority for a number of years. Ken’s mother had various jobs but basically was a homemaker. Ken went to Gary public schools and graduated from Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana. Had two years of law school and decided that that was not for him. And during the time he was at Wabash he took a two year break and spent two years in the Peace Corps in India, and came back, finished school, went to law school, but basically decided that his love was in the legislature so he worked in the Indiana state legislature. He started out, I believe, as a reading clerk and worked there for probably three to four years before we met. And as I think I’ve mentioned before, he ran the campaign for the lieutenant governor who was running for governor. He was defeated and that’s when Ken came to Ohio, and that’s when we met, and that was ‘71, ‘72.

DN: And he had some involvement in natural resources policy?

CP: Well, actually before he came to Ohio he did not. As I said, he was on the payroll of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources and worked for the director of that department, who was Bill Nye. He was basically what you would call today the congressional liaison; he was the liaison between the governor's office and the Department of Natural Resources. He was on loan much of that time to the governor's office to do candidate recruitment throughout the state. So he would do a lot of traveling and try to interest candidates in selected districts to run against the incumbents who were usually Republican. And during that time he also ran the campaign of state senator Tony Hall, who was running for secretary of state in Ohio. Tony was not successful in that race, but ended up becoming a congressman from the Dayton, Ohio area and is now still a sitting member of Congress.

DN: And what has Ken done since you came to Washington?

CP: Well, when I started working with Ed Muskie, Ken's first job, as mine was with Metzenbaum and was not a fit, his first job in Washington was with an Ohio congressman named Doug Applegate, from the Steubenville area of Ohio. It was not a good fit. He was his AA and it just wasn't a good fit. So Ken ended up becoming an, in probably the first six months we were in Washington, the administrative assistant to congressman Jim Florio from New Jersey, and remained Jim's AA until Jim decided that he was going to run for governor of New Jersey, this was the first. And if you think back that we've been in the Ohio governor's capitol and the Indiana and in the Illinois, we did not treasure the idea of going to Trenton, New Jersey.

So at that point Ken left Florio's office and became the governmental affairs representative for the Ethyl Corporation, which always amazed me because at the same time that Ken was working for the Ethyl Corporation, which incidentally was not a good fit either, Ed Muskie had just taken ethyl out of gasoline so it was, you know. I'm not quite sure what the Ethyl Corporation thought they were getting with Ken, but it might not have been what they thought. And once he left in the early eighties, in fact I think it was 1980, he left the Ethyl Corporation and went to the National Rural Letter Carriers where he still is today and he's the vice president for governmental affairs and it's been great for him.

DN: So he's been an expert in liaison and -

CP: He has indeed.

DN: - governmental relations.

CP: He has indeed, yeah.

DN: You went to work for Ed Muskie in early 1977.

CP: I did.

DN: And you were going to solve all his scheduling problems.

CP: Right, smooth out his life.

DN: What happened?

CP: Didn't smooth out his life. I think it would be fun to note probably my first meeting, which was not that interview, with Ed Muskie. When I was in Jack Gilligan's office in the early seventies, well, it was '71, Ed Muskie was the candidate coming to town for fund raising purposes and for support purposes, and the governor's office was hosting a reception for him. And my chore for that reception was to go over to the Neal House, which was right across the street from the Ohio capitol, and greet Senator Muskie and his staff and take them to the room where the reception was being held, and kind of entertain and make sure everyone was comfortable before the governor and his cabinet arrived. So I did just that.

And I can remember my first impression of Ed Muskie, meeting him at the elevator, was how very tall he was. He was a very tall, he was very gracious, he was very warm; unlike the man I would find sitting in the chair a number of years later interviewing me. But I still have, after that reception I, of course the staff wrote "thank you" notes to everyone that was involved. And I still have a "Dear Carole" signed "Ed" "thank you" note from the early seventies, which I cherish.

And the other kind of interesting part of that was that Jack Gilligan, and the entire Ohio slate of the elected representatives were, all during that spring, on the slate representing Ed Muskie at the Democratic National Convention. And of course a couple of months after that when he withdrew they were all off, so there was a great deal of disappointment, a great deal of disappointment.

DN: As I recall when congressman Gilligan was here, we had some dealings with him on legislation, and I'm trying to remember -

CP: Oh, did you really? That's interesting.

DN: I'm trying to remember what it was, but we did have some work with him

CP: He, although not a terribly successful Ohio politician, is another example of great dignity and integrity in public service. As evidenced by the fact that he just recently in his late seventies, living now, retired back to Cincinnati after teaching at Notre Dame for a number of years, ran for the county school board, after having been governor and in, you know I think he came out here and was at USAID for a while?

DN: I think so, yes.

CP: In any case, went back as a, you know, a public servant who cared about his world and ran for the school board and was elected, so is now an elected member of the Cincinnati public school board. Which I thought was really very, very cool.

DN: Well that's consistent with what I remember. So you didn't solve Ed Muskie's problems.

CP: I didn't, I didn't. Probably in the next ensuing twenty years I didn't.

DN: What do you remember about those early months, '77, '78?

CP: Well, it was a learning time for me of course, and I can remember feeling very special not only because of working for him, but because of the people I was working with. And I'm saying that, not only did I feel it then, but since then I have talked to so many people over the last twenty years who have said that the Muskie staff was truly a very special group of people. Sure there were problems here and there, but it was a staff that worked hard together and also played hard together, and you don't find a lot of that kind of camaraderie and caring. A lot of that was probably due in no small part to Gayle Cory, but you don't find a lot of that today on the Hill.

When I sometimes get, you know, melancholy and say, "Oh, it would be nice to work on the Hill," more than one person has said, "No, it's not the same." I mean, you would not have that special kind of dynamics that that office had. That being said, it was a very busy time legislatively. Muskie was the budget chairman, environmental pollution was a very, very busy committee, IGR also. I think that personally he was probably wondering whether or not he wanted to do this again. I don't think he had made a decision as to whether or not he wanted to run for reelection, and I think it was probably a more difficult time for him than most people on the outside would have thought.

DN: Did that come through in his dealings with you?

CP: It did to me, yes. I could feel that very clearly. He just seemed almost to have a resigned air about him with the whole cycle of, you know, the budget cycle that you had to go through. He also, I must say, was having a great deal of problems with his back, he was not in good health at that time. And I think that contributed probably to mood swings and, you know, not feeling real good about himself or what he was doing. I think it became almost same-old, same-old, if you will. I mean, he'd been there, he'd done it for so long, and perhaps his dreams of every going beyond the Senate were coming to an end, and I think that all played into how he looked at each day.

And I don't think that's too far of a reach because when we went to the State Department in 1980, you could see him just blossom into new skills, new, you know. The meaning of what he was doing, the excitement of the charges, even though it was an incredibly long, difficult and eventually frustrating process of eight months, trying to free the hostages. I, it brought out all the best in him, and he was on every day. Was he still up and down? Sure, but he was really very much involved every day in what he was doing, which I didn't always see in the Senate.

DN: How did this affect his relationship with members of the staff during, and I'd like to stick first to the '77-'78 period?

CP: I think that you will find in talking, as you will to most of the staff members, that he could

be very moody. And again, I think a big part of it was caused by his pain that he was suffering, from his back, and this was before and right after his surgery, and probably some mental frustration. And he did not have an open relationship with his entire staff, as you, I'm sure, know. He worked with, you know, the administrative assistant, his personal assistant, the staff directors of the committees and those people on a need to basis. And I think those people in close to him loved and admired him and put up with a lot of frustration during those years.

DN: I'm going to stop here as our time for this afternoon is gone. And then we'll return to this time and particularly I want to ask you about Gayle Cory and both her personality and skills and her role in the office during that time.

CP: Good, good.

DN: Thank you very much.

CP: You're welcome.

End of Interview