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Roberts, Gwil oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

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Interview with Gwil Roberts by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Roberts, Gwil

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

July 27, 1999

Place

Farmington, Maine

ID Number

MOH 125

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Biographical Note

Gwilym "Gwil" Roberts was born in Brownville, Maine in 1917. Mr. Roberts attended Brownville schools, graduating from Brownville High School in 1934. He enrolled in the Farmington State Normal School in 1934, and got his masters at the University of Maine, Orono. In 1940, he returned to the University of Maine at Farmington as a one-year replacement teacher and ended up teaching there for forty-three years as a professor of History. He is especially known for being able to remember the names of most all the students. A one time Republican and delegate to the 1952 state convention, he switched to the Democratic Party in 1969, winning election to the Maine Legislature in 1984, where he served until 1997. He published the book New Lives in the Valley in 1998. He died May 10, 2005.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: growing up in northern Maine; Republican domination of Maine politics before the 1950s; changing party affiliation to Democrat; Agnes Mantor; Currier and Joe Holman of Farmington; Mills family; Peter Mills II as U.S. Attorney and his political career; 1984 Farmington legislative race; Peter Mills II as a philanthropist; Janet Mills;

Benjamin Butler family; Dick and Lloyd Morton; television and political campaigns; the acceptability of voting Democrat after Muskie; Farmington's Republican roots; Roberts' relationship with Ed Muskie; KKK; F. Davis Clark; and a brief synopsis of Gwil's new book on Welsh history and migration.

Indexed Names

Abbott, Harlan
Abbott, Doris
Brewster, Owen, 1888-1961
Butler, Benjamin
Butler, Natalie
Chiarvalloti, Tony
Clark, Arthur
Clark, F. Davis
Durrell, Janice Ripley
Eisenhower, Dwight D. (Dwight David), 1890-1969
Goldwater, Barry M. (Barry Morris), 1909-1998
Hildreth, Horace
Holman, Currier
Holman, Joseph "Joe"
Jalbert, Louis
Landon, Alfred M. (Alfred Mossman), 1887-1987
Leavitt, Bud
Mallet, Richard "Dick"
Mantor, Agnes
Mills, David
Mills, Dora Ann
Mills, Janet
Mills, Katherine Louise (Coffin) "Kay"
Mills, Paul
Mills, S. Peter II
Mills, S. Peter III
Morton, Dick
Morton, Lloyd
Mudge, John
Muskie, Edmund S., 1914-1996
Nicoll, Don
Nixon, Richard M. (Richard Milhous), 1913-1994
Payne, Fred
Pease, Allen
Quinn, Jack
Roberts, Gwil

Roberts, William Sr.
Robinson, John D.
Roosevelt, Franklin D. (Franklin Delano), 1882-1945
Sewall, Sumner
Stevens, Stocky
Stevenson, Adlai E. (Adlai Ewing), 1900-1965
Strunk, Judd
Webster, Charlie
Whittier, Luther
Willkie, Wendell L. (Wendell Lewis), 1892-1944

Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: . . . interview on July 27th, 1999 with Gwilym Roberts at the University of Maine in Farmington, and I'm Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could you start by giving me your full name and spelling it?

Gwilym Roberts: Yes, Gwilym Richard Roberts, and the Gwilym is G-W-I-L-Y-M, which is Welsh for William.

AL: And where and when were you born, and where did you grow up?

GR: I was born and grew up in Brownville, Maine. I was born in 1917. I graduated from Brownville High School in a class of nine in 1934, and came down to Farmington to go to Farmington State Normal School in the fall of 1934.

AL: And that was right with the Great Depression coming on.

GR: That was with the Great Depression sort of on. And so I think, Orono was a lot nearer but we couldn't have thought of going to Orono. And I wondered about that later. In checking up I found that Orono would have cost about six hundred and twenty dollars a year, and Farmington cost three hundred and thirty-three dollars a year. Which, I earned a lot, so I could afford to go to Farmington.

AL: And what year did you graduate from Farmington?

GR: I graduated in 1937, then taught for a year up in Greenville Junior High for seventeen dollars a week, studied at Orono for a couple of years, and finished my resident for a masters just when they needed someone to fill in for one year here at Farmington at half pay, and half pay at Farmington was better than full pay at Greenville. I came over here for one year and Dick Mallett didn't come back at the end of the year, he stayed away twenty-eight years and then he came back. So I got entrenched and taught here forty-three years.

AL: Forty-three years.

GR: I started teaching here fifty-nine years ago this fall. So I've been around Farmington most of the time for the last, with a year away to study now and then, I've been around Farmington most of the time for the last fifty-nine years.

AL: Now how many children were there in your family when you were growing up?

GR: There were three of us, a sister, brother and myself.

AL: And your parents, what were their names and where did they come from?

GR: Dad, William Roberts, was a slate quarryman. And his father came from Wales and got over here and then sent for the five children and their mother to come over to Canada. Then they went across to Brownville where slate quarries were booming at that time. My mother's father also was a Welsh slate quarryman. My mother's mother was a Yankee from Brownville.

AL: I know you have, there are some people that you could tell us about. Stocky Stevens comes to mind first of all.

GR: I really can't say less about Stocky Stevens than I can about most people because I was not, again, maybe I ought to say for background that when I was coming of age, everyone registered Republican, nearly. The Democrats offered very little chance. And the choice was between liberal and conservative Republicans. And so people registered Republican. As one woman from New Sharon said once, I asked her for whom she was going to vote in the Republican primary in the spring and she said, "I'm going to vote for the weakest candidate, then vote Democratic in the fall." I don't think most of us put it quite this way, but that was the choice. And so I went to the Republican state convention as a delegate in 1952, and I did not become a Democrat until 1969. And then I ran for county commissioner in 1970, and then was elected to the legislature in 1984 as a Democrat.

Oh, Stocky Stevens, I remember Stocky just as a person who was active in Democratic politics. He was working as a store clerk maybe here in Farmington at that time, I think he was living in Strong. And then, of course, he moved to Portland and I noticed him mostly lately in the anti-abortion circles. But I just remember him, I didn't really know him well, as a Democratic activist up in Franklin County, of which there weren't too many.

AL: And then he switched to the Republican Party later on.

GR: Did he? I didn't know that. I knew that from his strong anti-abortion views and some other rightist views that he was expressing in letters to the editor, I figured that's where he should be.

AL: Right. How about Tony Chiarvalotti?

GR: And again, Tony was just someone I knew a little over in Wilton, he had his market. And again it was, but again, I wasn't, I wasn't active in Democratic politics until I shifted and immediately got to "direct the choir" by, as they say, by running for the county commissioner and then for the legislature. So I didn't know these, but these were two of the active Democratic workers.

AL: Now what did Tony Chiarvalotti do, what was his place in the community, do you remember that?

GR: Well, as I said, he had his market over in Wilton, and that's all I know. Beyond that I, his sister went, I knew his sister fairly well, but I didn't, sister or daughter, and I, but I didn't know Tony that much.

AL: How about Agnes Mantor?

GR: Agnes I knew very well. And she was a real Democratic activist, ran for the legislature and was beaten by a local farmer. It was pretty impossible for a Democrat to get anywhere. And maybe, maybe Agnes typifies the struggle people were up against in those days. Almost all of the representatives to the legislature were local Republican businessmen. And I ran across something the other day, kind of interested me, a lot of them were masters of the Masonic Lodge, which was, there's no hidden agenda here but it was, that was the kind of person. As I think them over, there were, those who were elected from say 1940 to 1960, I would say that two-thirds of them had been masters of the Masonic Lodge, but they most often were successful Farmington businessmen.

Agnes ran and was beaten, as usual. And it, maybe I, I guess I'd rather not see this in print, but Agnes had a mental breakdown in the 1940s and she'd had a lot of frustration. She got her bachelors degree after Farmington at BU, and then she taught history. But her mother was dependent upon her and dominated her life, I suppose. And as a result, Agnes never seemed to be able to get away and get any more education beyond the bachelors, and I'm sure that caused her some frustration. We were coming back from Agnes' mother funeral, her mother had been a matron, the term they used in those days, in the dormitory. And we were all sitting very soberly when Myron Starbird, a faculty member, made the comment, "Let's face it, she was a battle axe and she made Agnes' life miserable." So that, I've never forgotten that remark. I don't know about the battle axe part, but Agnes did feel she had to be very dependent upon her mother, and again that caused some frustration.

But maybe, and this is the part I would not want to probably see in print, if it ever were to be, that's all right, that when she had the mental breakdown, she thought that the Republican leaders had gotten control of her property here in Farmington. People like Lloyd Morton and Currier Holman, she felt they'd gotten control of her property, which would illustrate I think the kind of frustration that a Democrat fighting against the tide could feel. She was in the state hospital a year or two, made a good recovery, came back, and was a librarian and the college library is

named for her now. She was a very fine person and she had the courage to buck the tide when most of us remained Republicans and voted for liberal Republicanism, even after the Democrats had reasonable alternatives.

AL: You just mentioned Currier Holman.

GR: Yes, Currier Holman was very powerful. And he was all the more powerful because people thought he was powerful. He was the, had been on governor's council, he was in the senate, he was a very smart lawyer. And, he had a power that you run across occasionally. I withdrew my account from one bank because I didn't like Currier. I wrote a column to the local paper, and Currier and I didn't get along very well when I said some things about Currier in that column, like his actions while he was on the governor's council. And when I withdrew my money from the bank, it was controlled by Currier, one of my friends who worked in the bank said, "Well, you know, he also has just about as much influence on the other two banks in town as he has on ours."

A friend of mine was buying a house off the South Strong Road, fellow named "Buzz" Warren, now dead. And someone said to him, "Well when you're ready, you want to use Joe Holman for your attorney." And Buzz said, "I don't want to use Joe Holman under any circumstances. Why should I use Joe Holman?" And they said, "You're a long way off from the South Strong Road, you've got to arrange to have your road plowed. The county commissioners are going to make that decision, and Currier Holman controls the county commissioners." which was his comment.

I wrote a column once and I found out something that I don't think anybody else, no, I won't say that, but it was not generally known. Currier also was drawing a good salary as head of the Maine Consolidated Power Company, which was something that was not generally known in the town until I put it in my column in the paper. So (*unintelligible word*), there was, he did exercise a tremendous amount of power in the town. And he was a clever lawyer, I guess with all that implies, good and bad.

His, there was a bitterness among the lawyers, a bitterness between the Millses and the Holmans, and they were mostly Republican, they were both Republicans, of course. But when Peter Mills became federal D.A. for Maine, he prosecuted Joe Holman for cheating the poor in that Joe was supposedly charging more. The fees were set for handling cases for the poor, a certain kind of case, and he supposedly charged much more. Peter Mills was unable to get a conviction because the idea that this well dressed, obviously well-to-do fellow would cheat the poor just seemed ridiculous to the jury. But his fellow attorneys knew him pretty well and they suspended him from the practice of law for I guess maybe nine months in this episode, which showed a decline obviously in the power the Holmans had. But Currier was really a powerful individual.

AL: Was Currier still living at that time, that they took Joe to court?

GR: I'm not sure, I'm not, I don't think he was. His power had declined but he I remember they had a trial down here at the Learning Center at the college and I thought that's

something that never could have happened. Of course there wasn't any Learning Center at the college a while ago, but the thought of Joe Holman going on sort of a hearing before the law group at the college was a surprising sort of a thing. The, shall I talk about Peter Mills?

AL: Sure, yes.

GR: Peter, there's an article which I'm sure Andrea's familiar with it, the, in the *Maine Times* I guess it was, early June, about the notable Mills family. And they really are a remarkable family. And these are Peter's children, Peter and his divorced wife Kay, who lives here in town. When I came here in the forties, Peter was active and he was a liberal, a liberal wing of the party. And a friend of mine, Doris Abbott, said to me, "If you're a friend of Peter's, you've got to be a real friend because you spend so much time defending him." And Myron Starbird again, I said to Myron, we were discussing Peter's fighting on different cases. And I said, "Well, you must admit that he has fought for a lot of good causes." And Myron said, "Yes, but he's fought just as hard on a lot of causes that didn't amount to anything."

Now Peter was a scrapper, he liked to fight. And he fought, again, he was a liberal wing of the party, and he also took greater pleasure in seeing someone squirm than any other person I ever knew. He would attack, somehow get a story in the paper that would condemn someone, supposedly for doing something that indicated they really deliberately had done something wrong. And this sort of thing had never happened to them before. So Peter made a great, a great many enemies.

And, I could say he accused the bank trustees of First National, I guess it was, of some crookedness when they brought John Robinson in as a trustee. It's a complicated story. Peter told me he'd written the story about John Robinson and the crookedness, and then he told me that his, the Gannett papers refused to print it. And so he got it printed over in the *Bangor News*, which was John Robinson's home town territory. But then the *Bangor News* had to issue a front page apology for the article, which turned out, they felt, not to be true and opened them to suit. So, again, this was the kind of thing that Peter did. And he fought for a lot of liberal causes, but he also fought for other things and he embarrassed people.

See, he was a rising young star in the state legislature right before WWII. And he went in and became a lieutenant commander, and I think he'd been maybe majority leader in the House before the war, and he came back expecting to resume his career. But again, he'd made so many enemies in the Republican Party that they found a fellow in town who was very well-liked and who had no business being a Democrat, Mr. Tyler, Jarvis Tyler, who had become a Democrat in 1899 because he was going with a girl whose father was running for the legislature as a Democrat. He'd never gotten around to change, although he was a local banker and conservative. But they got him to run as a Democrat. I suppose this was 1946, probably. And he beat Peter in the election, and this sort of thwarted Peter's desire to pick up his career again.

And I've forgotten what happened after that, except that when I ran for the legislature in 1984, Peter was up for the Republican nomination. And I thought it was going to be a very nasty fight

when Peter, by this time Peter and I were no longer friends. And, but in the Republican primary, Peter's opponent was a not too popular professor at the college named John Mudge. And in the primary, again, so many Republicans were not enthusiastic for Peter, and John Mudge had a group of ardent supporters, a Christian group, right-wing group, that he was able to win the primary, I'm sure to Peter's great surprise, against Peter. And therefore I had a much calmer and much easier campaign than I would have had.

But Peter was one of the very few, and stop me after a while if I go on too far, Peter was one of the very few, someone said there were only seven attorneys among the rep--, in the state, who supported Margaret Chase Smith [in 1948] when she ran in the Republican primary, for the Senate. The other people, the others had the, I mean Sumner Sewall, Horace Hildredth, they had the Republican supporters. And someone said only seven lawyers supported her, I don't know. In any case, Peter supported Margaret Chase Smith and to the great surprise of the columnists, she won that primary and went then to the United States Senate. And Peter was handsomely rewarded for having supported her. He became the federal D.A. for Maine for that, in that period of time, and I, so I suppose maybe it was when Ei-, yes, it would have been when Eisenhower came in, that was the first Republican administration after that, and he served maybe, yes, Eisenhower, I've forgotten exactly how many he served, maybe he served only eight under Eisenhower, and then he came back under the next, under Nixon, and served maybe another eight. So he served something like sixteen years as a federal D.A. for Maine.

So Peter had quite a, quite a campaign and it was, again there was a mixed reaction in that he had supported a lot of good causes, but he also had this sort of perverse delight in embarrassing people and trying to indicate they did something that not only was mistaken but also was deliberately wrong. And that came back to haunt him, as when he ran against John Mudge, and when he ran against Jarvie Tyler in '46, and when he ran against John Mudge in '84.

AL: Now, is he still living or has he passed away?

GR: Peter Mills, in his old age, has become a great benefactor for the college. He's given away a great deal of money and done very well with it. He is still alive, although I suppose he's eighty-seven or so now and not in very good health now. But he gave the Peter Mills Room in the, a media center room in the library, fully equipped, and he's given scholarships for various good causes. And so he's become a great benefactor in his old age.

AL: Now he also has some, his whole family is very successful. The children have done lots of interesting things. Can you tell me a little bit about them as well?

GR: That article in the *Maine Times* came out on June 8th or something, did quite a job on them. But of course Peter Mills, Jr. [III], S. Peter Mills, I don't know if he calls himself junior, from Skowhegan, has been a leading member of the Senate and a very hard worker. And also, I don't know how I'd describe it but, not, erratic isn't the word, he's been far from firm in his support of Republican policies. He's a person who does not, is not necessarily going to follow the party line.

AL: Follows the issues?

GR: He will follow the issues and doesn't mind speaking out against these things he thinks, which he thinks are wrong. Janet was federal, I'm sorry, was state district attorney for Franklin, Oxford and Androscoggin counties for several years. Dora, Dora Ann sometimes called, is the top health official in the state of Maine now. Paul appears on television each election, he has encyclopedic knowledge of the political history of the state in the last fifty years or so, he generally appears on television. I guess I have, David is not at all active in politics or anything like that. But they are a remarkable, I think the article calls them the "Remarkable Mills Family" or something, and they are, they are. And it seems to me that they, none of them have the quality that Peter had of antagonizing so many people. On the other hand, Peter did have a successful career, and again, those many, many years as federal D.A.

AL: I'd also like to talk a little bit about the Benjamin Butler family?

GR: Yes. Ben Butler was in the legislature and he and Peter feuded at the town level, they were rivals for the, to be moderator of the town meeting. And whoever was moderator would find the other one challenging him from the floor, all the time. So there was that rivalry there. Benjamin was in the state legislature. And Ben and his wife wrote some beautiful local history books. Ben died some time ago, and there is not, his son has not been at all, or daughter, not been at all active in politics. And so Ben was a local attorney. And I don't know where I'd classify him politically, I don't, I think they were all against one another, the Millses and the Butlers and the Holmans and so on. And of course there was the Mortons, the Morton family.

AL: Who are they?

GR: Dick Morton, the elder, who's now about maybe late seventies, was in the legislature. His father was in the state legislature. His father was Republican state chairman, Lloyd Morton. And then Dick was in the, Dick was in the state legislature for a long time, did very well, and was in a position of leadership in the Republican Party. The, I think it was a tragedy, from my own point of view, in a way, that even though he was Republican and I was Democrat, he got beaten when we had a, Charlie Webster decided to run against him.

And I think Charlie figured this out, that he couldn't beat him in a Republican primary. So Charlie ran as a Democrat and spent, a tremendous campaigner, one woman said he called on her four times to try to get one vote from her. And meanwhile, Dick Morton had beaten a number of opponents easily, and he was unaware of all the work that he [Charlie] was doing. And so, whenever that year was, I suppose around in the very early '80s, Webster beat Dick for his seat. And Dick at this time had retired, I think, from Morton's or was about to, and he was in a position to exert leadership. And it seemed to me he was standing up for very many good and forward thinking causes. After he got down to Augusta, Charlie Webster announced on the steps of the State House that he was changing to be a Republican instead of a Democrat. And I've forgotten how long he was in before he, so that was where he belonged according to his beliefs.

But meanwhile, that ended Dick Morton's career.

Young Dick, however old he may be now, fifty or so, a lawyer, an attorney here in town [currently in 2002, he is Judge of Probate], has been an official at the local level; has never run for the state legislature.

AL: Is there also some history of the Butler family, did you ever know about the descendants of Benjamin Butler being from the Civil War era?

GR: No. Benjamin Butler, or Natalie Butler, his wife, have told me that some people think he looks like the, he looks like the Ben Butler from the Civil War era. There were several Butler families in Farmington who were active, but no connection to the fellow. Benjamin Butler was a general from Massachusetts I think, who was short, bald headed, squint-eyed. Ben Butler was not squint-eyed, but the other characteristics applied, which is why his wife said something, something that Ben looks like the Ben Butler of the Civil War era.

It was Ben Butler who, in the occupation of New Orleans, the general, said that any women insulting his soldiers would be treated as a woman of the streets plying her vocation, which caused a bit of commotion and so, he was a stormy guy, too, and Ben tended to be a stormy guy. Ben and Nat did a beautiful job on a series of local histories in which they took the houses in different parts of town and analyzed the owners and brought in a lot of local history. Ben died a number of years ago. But there was a, and then there was another firm, the F.L. Butler Company was a different firm, and he wrote a history of the town back in 1885. And no connection to Ben and Nat, who wrote a history later on.

AL: Interesting. When you were here in the 1950s and you really weren't politically involved yet yourself, but you must have observed some of what was going on in the state with the Democrats coming together, as well as Republicans voting Democratic to elect Ed Muskie in '54. Do you remember a sense of what was happening?

GR: No, not as much as I might have. I had a Fulbright grant over in North Wales in '53 to '4. And even though we were going in debt we stayed around for two or three months beyond the end of the Fulbright, which was very adequate for a single man, not too adequate for a married man with one child and a wife eight months pregnant when we went over. But we did stay over there that summer, so we got back into Maine in September of '54. And in those days, of course, the state elections were in September, and so I didn't see that election. Of course, I think it was a tremendous thing.

And Louis Jalbert, whom I didn't really know, but I got talking with him up here one day, he was up for some committee or something. And he said that, and this is probably something everyone knows but I'd never thought of it before, he said that we must not overlook the effect of TV on Ed Muskie's winning. He said, "You go into Maine houses back at that time, and there were usually two things on the living room table to read, the *Saturday Evening Post* and some Republican newspaper," either from Boston or from Maine. And he said, "It was pretty hard for

a Democrat to get in on that.” But, I remember I was in New York in ‘48-’9, and my friend and I were betting on how soon TV would come to Maine. We could see it through the windows of bars down there in New York then, and of course it came in shortly after this. And so, as Louis Jalbert said, “When you’ve got TV, then they could see Ed Muskie, this handsome, poised guy who obviously knew what he was talking about.” And Jalbert said, you mustn’t overlook the effect of that, of the TV on bringing him in.

When he ran the first time, I don’t think Catholicism was much of an issue. I don’t know how much of an issue it was, but people didn’t expect him to win. But I remember that after, the day after the election I met a fellow on the post office steps and he said, “Well, we got to be sure that Catholic don’t win more than one term,” which I always remembered. It made me more determined that I would be voting for Ed Muskie and so on.

So this tremendous effect that I think, this is nothing everyone doesn’t know, that it made it respectable to be a Republican [*sic* Democrat] after Ed Muskie came in, people, suddenly people could become a Muskie follower. But still, you haven’t had many Democrats win at the local level here. Charlie Webster won and promptly gave, became a Republican. I won one term. And when I ran for the second time I’d had an appendicitis operation in Moscow, Russia maybe a year before. And Charlie spread the rumor around that my health was so bad that I probably would not be able to serve out the term if I were elected. I didn’t know that until after the election was over. So I lost by a narrow margin.

And then of course the, but the tremendous effect of the Goldwater candidacy in 1964 when Luther Whittier, who had run for a number of times and didn’t own a car and didn’t have a telephone and didn’t have electricity in his house, and rode his bicycle around to campaign, and in that Goldwater election when this fantastic turnaround in the make-up of the House, Luther was swept in along with the rest and became a Repub-, a Democrat representing this district. I think he generally voted along with his conservative Republican friends from Bowdoin. Being a Bowdoin graduate was practically a career with Luther, it was the one thing in his life that really took up so much of his time and space. But that’s something else again.

AL: So, do you think that Farmington has been predominantly Republican?

GR: All the way through, and I don’t see why, I don’t see why it hasn’t changed much. That is, you have the college here now. And when Jack Quinn came in 1970, the students were organized. And when, oh yes, there was a short term left, a partial term left, and Joe Holman ran. And the Democrats nominated Judd Strunk, who was a well known singer. And the college students turned out pretty well in 1970 to support Judd Strunk, and that was a very close election. Bud [Leavitt], the sports commentator from the Bangor paper, appeared on TV on the night before the election and did a favorable thing for Joe Holman, and some think that that may have swung it. Kingfield went quite strongly for Joe Holman. And it was, and so he did, he won that short term. But that was that little burst.

But in general it is still a Republican, much more a Republican territory. A Democratic woman

almost unseated Judge Benoit, and up country we've had a Democrat elected, we've had a Democrat elected in Wilton lately. But Republicans, the Republicans still seem to control Farmington in spite of a lot of forces you'd think might have weakened their hold.

AL: Did you ever meet Muskie over the years?

GR: Oh yes. And of course, again, I became, when I said about joining the party and leading the choir immediately, you don't recall probably that when Wendell Willkie, which converted to become a Republican, and he had been a Democrat, and he was running for the president. And someone, a Republican of long standing didn't want to support him. And one of his friends said, "Well now, if there was someone of rather bad character and they changed their ways and wanted to join the church, wouldn't you welcome them in?" And the fellow said "Yes, but I wouldn't have her leading the choir the first Sunday." So I joined the party and I immediately tried to lead the choir. I ran for county commissioner in one close, and lost. My opponent was a good friend of mine. He thought I came pretty close and I didn't think I came close enough.

And then, of course again I ran twice in '84 and '86. And in those days, yes, I got to know Muskie, because I think Muskie was a symbol for all of us. I mean, the reviving of the Demo--, it, as I said earlier I think, it made it respectable to be a Democrat. People who would never have thought of being a, of voting Democratic, could say they voted for Muskie and it would be a respectable sort of a vote, this tremendous impact that he had. And I didn't, I didn't get to know him as well, and I didn't get to know him the way someone might have known him who was working hard for the Democrats in the 1950s and 1960s.

I changed my registration on January 1st, New Year's Day 1969. And so from that period on I worked with him, but did not know him very well. I don't have any particular things about him that many, many other people would not have in much more detail. But, except the general feeling, and I'm repeating it about the third time, of the tremendous impact on a Republican area like Franklin County where he just revolutionized the feeling of people about being a Democrat and voting Democratic.

AL: It was said that a lot of Republicans voted for Muskie in the mid to late '50s when he ran for governor, and then possibly as senator as well. Did you ever talk to or hear about Republicans who felt strongly about Muskie and, if so, what did they, how did, what was it that made them think Muskie was an okay guy?

GR: Let me wander back just a little bit. In 1952 we were up to Dot and Harlan Abbott's house election night. And as the returns came in, I think there were twenty-two of us, a lot of couples of around, of about, oh, thirty-five to forty, and out of the twenty-two, twenty-one of us favored Eisenhower. My wife was the only one who favored Adlai Stevenson. I felt in some ways her stand was more honest than mine, but I think mine was practical and the better stand. I don't know, I never, I didn't talk with people. I just felt, I mean, obviously when he won that victory over Payne and then won in the senate races, then, I don't know if they would, especially. But obviously when the votes came in, if the vote comes in and he beats Republicans again and

again, obviously Republicans don't have to apologize for voting for him because obviously it's what many, many other Republicans are doing. And I don't know how much they talked about it.

I remember that one of the local bankers and I had a hard, a lot of debates during the Muskie-Payne campaign. And he was very subdued the day after the election I recall, but he surely had not quieted down his dislike for Muskie. But for so many middle-of-the-roaders, again, here was a fellow who stood for good things. Again, I mentioned that fellow saying that we got to be sure that that Democrat doesn't win for the second ti-, that Catholic doesn't win for the second time.

The Masons invited, always invited the governor to attend their annual meeting, and usually the governor had been a Mason, most often. And here was Ed Muskie as a Catholic. And so they invited Muskie to attend, and to their amazement he showed up, and made a favorable impression. This is the kind of a thing. So I'm really not answering your question very well, but obviously seeing him on TV and watching what he was doing, here was a fellow who was knowledgeable, personable and stood for the things in which they believed.

AL: Now in '56 did you have an opportunity to see him on television at the time?

GR: I don't remember. I, see, Stevenson ran again, didn't he, in '56? I think, I don't, I'm sure I did. Well, no I probably didn't. We didn't have television for a long while. My wife thought it wasn't too good for, have the kids watching too much television. And so they used to go to the neighbors on Saturday morning to watch television. And I'm not, I don't think we got television until the mid '60s, or at least the mid '60s, sometime before '69. But no, I didn't watch, I wasn't watching him on TV.

I was all for him. And again it was a, but it was a very, if you had been in the minority party all along as so many of us had, even though some of us were secretly in the minority party until, in my case it was '69, it was a very satisfying thing, I think, to people, to have Muskie come through and have this Democrat win and be so much respected. Because the Democrats really got very little respect. I remember in WWII they ran a candidate who got about twenty-five percent of the vote in one of the gubernatorial elections. So it was a, I guess what I'm trying to say over and over again is just, for this Republican area, for those of us who were liberal or middle-of-the-roaders, or Democrats really in wolf's clothing by working the Republican party for liberalism, it was a very satisfying thing to have Muskie win.

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

GR: Sure.

End of Side A
Side B

AL: We are now on side two of the interview with Mr. Gwilym Roberts at the University of

Maine at Farmington on July 27th, 1999. I would like to talk just a little bit about the occasions at which you did meet Muskie, what were the reasons for the occasions and what were your interactions with him?

GR: Really it was, again, not very, they were not very important. As a person who was running for county office, running for the legislature, the occasion in which I met him would be Democratic rallies I suppose, in Franklin County. He might get up to one of them, occasions in Augusta, Democratic get-togethers. Most often in small groups, and so it was, it wasn't really anything notable. I didn't know him well enough to have any real memories of him except having, taking pleasure in talking with him. If I'd been active in the Democratic party in the 1950s and 1960s I probably would have a lot more worthwhile memories.

AL: Are there any anecdotes or stories or recollections that you have living in Farmington all the years that you have of politics, or something I haven't asked you about that would be important?

GR: Yes, maybe I'll tell a couple. One involves my wife and myself. We found ourselves voting Democratic more and more while we were still registered with the Republican Party. Then one day we got an invitation to a Democratic picnic, and my wife said, "I thought they had a secret ballot." But that's neither here nor there now, she was only joking. We had both resolved to shift to the Democratic Party, but then her kidneys failed. And at the end of December 1968 she was in very bad shape and had to go to Boston to live for a year, on a dialysis unit, since there were no dialysis units in Maine. And so that was the time when we had decided to shift, and so I shifted to the Democratic Party January 1st, 1969. And she really, when they began to correct her blood situation, she really was not with it for a while. And it was some months later that she was startled to find that, as she said, "You mean you're a Democrat and I'm still a Republican?" And she, it took her a while to change.

The other thing, I remember that we used to gather up at Janice Ripley Durrell's house, she was a reporter for the Portland paper and the returns were there. And I remember Peter Mills, I guess I was there, yeah, I guess I was, I suppose I was there, I suppose that was the occasion in 1964 when this Goldwater thing, this Goldwater sweep. People know that, some people who agreed to be on the Democratic ticket only with the understanding that there was no chance that they were going to win, they found themselves winning a seat in the legislature. And Peter Mills was running. And as the returns came in, of course that '64 election, I mean, the figures are easily available, but I've forgotten what it was. But it was a, from an overwhelming Democratic, Republican senate to an overwhelming Democratic senate in one term.

As the returns came in, Republican after Republican leadership would be reported as losing. And I remember I was talking with, I guess I was sitting there with Peter that night watching the returns. And Peter would say, 'Oh, so and so has lost, well that means that so and so is going to become the Republican leader in the House or Senate.' And then somebody else, and he said, 'Well he's lost, that means so and so.' And then finally he said, then somebody else lost and Peter said, "Wait a minute, that means I'm going to be the Republican leader in the Senate."

And then shortly came the return that Peter had lost, too. So that was one of the anecdotes of watching this incredible evening where Republican leader after Republican leader fell. And I still remember Peter figuring very carefully who was going to assume leadership, gets to the point where he was, and then finding that even he had lost to a Democrat on that night in 1964.

I was in Farmington in 1936 as a college student, and I remember seeing the parade for Alf Landon from the sunflower state, and that parade seemed to stretch miles on the road up towards Strong. And I figured that, really, Franklin Roosevelt didn't stand a show of winning in 1936. And of course he didn't in Maine or Vermont, but of course he won everywhere else with this tremendous . . . So I guess probably my general feeling is that the Republicans were active, they had big meetings, they had the money, they had more attractive candidates. The Democrats were poorly organized, unable to get people to run ordinarily, who would really stand a show of winning, because there just wasn't much of any show of winning. I don't know that I have any other particular anecdotes of politics during that time.

AL: What was life like growing up, in Brownville?

GR: Yes.

AL: And what was it like growing there and how was it different from when you came to Farmington?

GR: When I came to Farmington, I thought I'd really hit the city for the first time. In fact, my folks had me go over to Dover-Foxcroft, which must have been three thousand people, to stay with my aunt and uncle to see how I'd stand being in a city. But this was, again, Depression years, my father was out of work a lot of the time. He lost his only good job he ever had in the Railway Shopman's Strike of 1922, '23. He had been a slate quarryman until the quarries closed. And so, but we were not . . .

We had a picture, my father and a neighbor cuts a lot of wood, they were trying to sell it as stove wood. But in the end it mostly rotted in piles there in our yard, 'cause nobody could buy it. And we had a picture showing my father and his neighbor piling up this wood and hauling it in this sled, drawn by a horse. And I said to my older sister, "Now that was the Depression, wasn't it?" She said, "No, no, those were the good times." In other words, this was, so the Depression was nothing new to us. And she pointed out that in the picture I was maybe six or seven years old, which meant that this was in 1924 or '25, so those, so it was, those were kind of hard times anyway, after that strike. And then he worked in the mill and went out on the bridge crew in the summer.

I had a, I earned a lot of, I was very proud when I could earn enough money to buy my clothes. I mowed lawns. I cut pulp wood for a job before the chain saw was invented. I earned a little over two dollars a day cutting pulp wood, working very long days. I hayed for a living, went out haying, the low point of my career as a hay maker. I had an arm that didn't work very well and so I, but I felt I had to prove that I could do these things that I really couldn't do, I guess. And I

went out to hay for Mr. Laird over in Barnard, and part of the bargain was that I got my board and room even though it was only four miles from home. And I worked as hard as I could, and I wasn't very good, let's face it. And then, let's see, Mr. Laird and his wife went to bed, their room was directly beneath my bedroom, and there was an open register between them. This is not going to turn out to be a real racy story. But he came in, he said to his wife, "You know, I'm afraid that new boy's not going to be any good." And that was my, that was one of the low points of my career. When I worked through the haying season and he asked me to stay on and take away from the threshing machine, then that was a real triumph because I had survived that sort of thing.

So we, we were hard up, everyone was hard up back during the time. I look upon it as a happy time. My brother, who was much more conscious of styles and much more conscious of a lot of things than I was, younger brother though he be, looked back upon it with more memories of the poverty and more memories of wearing clothes that were made over, and that sort of a thing. But we had the, we were proud of working. It was a very small town; church activities, playing basketball in high school, even though I never got in any game. I look back upon it as a happy time, but all of my life was happier after I left Brownville in 1934, than it was when I was there.

Being an adolescent with an arm that lacks a muscle and trying to play varsity sports, was not, didn't give a person great confidence in himself. So I was happier after that, than I had been before. But I look back upon it, again, hard times was a part of the picture, but I think everyone was hard up. Agnes Mantor, teaching history here, once said that she thought that people in Maine small towns felt the Depression much less than people in the cities, that they had food very often, they had cans of canned goods.

And I had someone do a research paper once, I think from the Rumford paper, I think it was the *Rumford Falls Times*, a couple of the Depression years, and that's the depth of the Depression. And that student came back to report that, from reading the *Rumford Falls Times*, you wouldn't have known there was any Depression. There was no mention of any hard times, even though, of course, the price of stock in the paper companies there collapsed during those years. And I'm sure there must have been a lot of hard times. Yet the paper never said anything about any signs of hard times. So we, I guess probably the normal hard times of living in a town where the quarries closed a year or two before I was born, and where the farms were gradually declining, and where you'd cut pulp wood for a living, and not a very good living. And so I guess maybe the Depression didn't seem that much different to the rest of our lives in that period.

I suppose when I got down to Farmington, I was very happy at Farmington. It was the first time really that I'd been in a community where there are, were a very high percentage of the people who were interested in intellectual things. And that was, Farmington did not have very high standards during the time, but it was a community of people, the faculty cared for the students. And it was a group where intelligence and interest in intellectual things was respected, which I suppose is why I liked it.

AL: Brownville and Dover-Foxcroft, are they fairly close together?

GR: They're seventeen miles apart.

AL: I'm interested to know if you ever heard of the Ku Klux Klan in that area of Dover-Foxcroft when you were growing up. Was there ever any mention of it, or knowledge that they existed and had an influence?

GR: The Ku, of course I was only nine years old at the time that Brewster ran for governor and refused to renounce, when he ran against [Ernest L.] McLean, and he refused, Brewster, who at that time was Ralph O. Brewster, rather than R. Owen Brewster as he became later, he refused to renounce Klan support. And I was too young to remember much. I have a picture, I have a couple of pictures, I've had a couple of pictures anyway. One showing a Ku Klux Klan parade in Lincoln, Maine with the red school house at the front, and people with their masks off, wearing sheets, parading, of course with the school house emphasizing the condemnation of parochial schools. I also have seen a picture of Ku Klux Klan in Milo, Maine. Again, a big parade in Milo sometime again in the middle 1920s.

And at one time I found some Ku Klux Klan, a Ku Klux Klan folder or sheet of some kind, which my father had brought home from a Masonic meeting. Which I'm sure, oh yes, and I looked up in the Masonic records and I found the place where the grand master had told the annual meeting that lodgers should be sure not to take, give any support to Ku Klux Klan as an organization. But, and it was not the kind of thing my father would have done, but obviously someone at the Ku Klux Klan meet-, sorry, at the Masonic meeting was handing out Ku Klux Klan propaganda, and he'd tucked it in his pocket and had brought it home. So those are my only memories of Ku Klux Klan. I, sometimes things blur. John Robinson's wife's brother, this gets complicated, wrote a masters thesis over to Orono on the Ku Klux Klan in Maine and so I read that. And so I suppose what I read there kind of blurs along with what I might have heard somewhere else.

AL: Did you know, did you ever know F. Davis Clark, Judge Clark?

GR: Yes, yes.

AL: Can you tell me a little bit about him?

GR: Not very much. F. Davis Clark was a big guy and played basketball at a time when anyone who was six-foot-four was a giant in high school basketball. And there was a fellow named Webb from Milo who was six-foot-four. Milo was five miles away and that was where we went for our trading, as we used to put it. And F. Davis Clark was a, I remember him first as a big guy who was over six feet, but who really wasn't very good as a basketball player. And so I, his father ran a furniture store, Arthur Clark I guess it was, on Main Street there in Milo. And so it's really a case, I never knew him to talk to until later, and he of course was active in Democratic, oh, he ran for governor at about, it may have been . . .

AL: Nineteen forty-two [*sic* 1946].

GR: . . . and it may, this may have been the low point.

AL: Nineteen forty-six.

GR: I, was it '46? Okay. Then it must have been somebody else that ran. But his, his was one of the low points, when he ran for governor. Maybe it was a couple years before. There was one point, as I said, where I think it got down to around twenty-five percent, and it may not have been much more than that when Davis Clark ran. Then, of course, he was named to a judgeship. But I never, so, he's just a fellow whom I've known casually to see somewhere, never knew him personally, well at all.

AL: I wondered because he came from a very strong democratic family in that area, and so was very aware of the Ku Klux Klan when they came to Dover-Foxcroft.

GR: Yes. And you see, he's, his home was Milo and so that big parade that I saw . . . Is he still living, do you know? I'd be interested in talking with him about that some time. Where does he live, down state, Portland, Lewiston?

AL: No, still lives up north.

GR: Up in Milo? Yeah, okay. No, I never, that would be interesting because it intrigued me. Of course, as everyone knows I suppose, Maine should not have been a strong Ku Klux Klan state like Indiana was, but this was a time as some say when the Franco-Americans were just getting a start. And they were beginning to own stores, beginning to work their way up from the bottom of the pile. And some, and the Ku Klux Klan in Maine I think, yes, was anti-Franco-American.

I was thinking, I talked to a woman over in Madison. The Ku Klux Klan paraded, were very active in Madison. I'm trying to think whether it was Madison or Brewer where they had to post a guard when they built the Catholic church, for fear that it would be, would be destroyed. Some woman, I spoke over in Madison at some point, at the high school, about this sort of thing, Ku Klux Klan.

And I talked to a woman in a restaurant where I stopped for a cup of coffee on the way to the meeting. And she said that there were, there was Klan advertising, or there was evidence of Klan activity in Madison when she was probably in her teens, and she was kind of worried. And she used to baby sit for this couple, and she told them that she was worried. And the fellow said, "No, no. I can guarantee it, you'll have nothing to worry about." And she found later he was a leading member of the Klan. So, and I'm sure she had nothing to worry about physically.

But again, that was, that was, of course there wasn't, after that woman in Indiana was captured and supposedly raped by the head of the Klan, then it declined pretty fast in Maine. And I'm

not, I suppose, I don't know just what, this is all on the record, I suppose it reached its peak in what, 1920s, '4, '5, '6, something like that, and I've forgotten when the Indiana rape thing took place but it, it went down hill. It's just one of those things that seems out of character for Maine, in a way, but yet we know there are a lot of evidences of racism in Maine, and surely a lot of anti-Catholic feeling in Maine, especially back at that time. Which I'm sure any Franco-American felt back at that time.

AL: I have one more, well, I have a couple more questions. One is, I can remember a teacher at Mt. Blue High School, Mrs. Mills. Was she related in any way to the Mills family?

GR: Mrs. Mills was quite closely related to the Mills family. In other words, she was Peter Mills' wife.

AL: Kay. Okay.

GR: Kay, and the mother of all those kids, and she was a teacher, came from Ashland up in the County. She is, she's still alive and very ac-, in fact I had lunch with her in the last couple of days. And she lived with Peter for many, many years until they broke up and were divorced. I don't know, quite a long while ago, fifteen or twenty years ago maybe, yes.

AL: And tell me a little bit about the book that you've authored on Welsh ancestry?

GR: Yes, I, when I started working, writing, working on my masters at Orono, I thought about writing on the Welsh and the slate quarries of Maine. But my father said, "You won't find anything," he said, "the Welsh couldn't write English and the English didn't give a damn about the Welsh." And I saw an article in the *Bangor Daily News*, a little item in the *Brownville News*, that said: "*The child of an Irish family was run over by a dray and killed at the quarry last week.*" No mention of who the Irish family was. So I decided that wasn't what I wanted to do and I did one on the League of Nations and how Maine viewed the League of Nations.

But, then I took my father and mother over to Vermont where there are a lot of Welsh, and he heard a Welsh chorus, and that was fresh in my mind when I went to Columbia in the fall of 1948. And so I chose the topic, actually the topic I was urged to choose and did was the history of Western Rutland County, Vermont.

So I researched much on many, many topics before narrowing down to the Welsh. I got a Fulbright grant and worked for a year in Wales, on life in the slate quarry areas there in the Welsh communities. And I spent many years reading newspapers from the Welsh communities of the New York-Vermont border, which was very large as compared to the very tiny, little community up in Brownville, Maine. And so I had spen-, I had to learn to read Welsh first, along with the other two languages I had to learn to read in the doctoral program. And I, it seemed to go together not too fast, and finally it went together well, after almost twenty years.

And so I had planned, I planned to finish it and to go down and defend in the spring of 1969.

And then that was the time that my wife's kidneys failed in the fall of '68. And so she went down to Boston for the year and I had charge of the five kids. I became a dean, which job I was in for the next eleven years. My advisors all left Columbia. I had no sabbatical during the last twenty-three years of my teaching at Farmington, so I've just put it aside to my great pain, until after some twenty-seven more years.

I found this tremendous interest over in Vermont, in the Welsh community, slate quarry history, a big Welsh, Slate Valley Museum, so I knew I had to dig it out. And the hardest thing I ever did was to dig it out and try to remember what I had planned to do with those cold notes twenty-seven years before. Which, I finally did get the thing written and published it last summer, just about a year ago now, titled *New Lives in the Valley*, which is on the slate quarries and people, and villages in North Wales, the Welsh migration, and the slate quarries and Welsh villages of the New York-Vermont border.

AL: Interesting.

GR: And I'm happy to report that out of the one-thousand-fifty-five copies that were printed, most of them are gone now, and I guess I'm going to have another printing, so that's a small triumph of sorts.

AL: Congratulations!

GR: But no one should take fifty years to write a book. I took forty-nine years and a number of months, but not quite fifty.

AL: I also have heard that you were well known around the University of Maine at Farmington for remembering the names of all the students.

GR: When I came here the college was very small, three-hundred-and-seventy-five students. And it remained very small, we had only about six hundred by 1966. And every student had to have my course in order to graduate from, and I was the only history teacher in American history for those, for the first twenty-four, twenty-five years I was here. And I identified very strongly with these students. They were mostly poor, reasonably poor, middle to lower class, few upper class financially, kids from small Maine towns. And somehow I had a kiB, children, they're no longer children, students, from almost every town in Maine and so I got this tremendous feeling for each town in Maine. And so I could think of the town first, but because they all had to have my course and the college was very, very small. I did get to, I guess I did, I had about four thousand students.

And I had to go over all those names on one occasion for the fun of it. I tried checking off or making a little mark, and I went through the, if I could remember the face, could see the face of that student, and I found that I could see about three thousand faces when I read the name. So yes, most of them I remembered pretty well. I have now been retired for sixteen years and the first students I had were sixty-nine years ago, so I think my memory bank is probably kind of

riddled, or kind of leaky, or kind of overcrowded or something now, but for a long while I did identify very strongly with them. And they had to have my course, and most were from these small Maine towns that I knew so well.

AL: Is there anything else that I haven't asked you or mentioned that you think would be valuable?

GR: Nothing else that I can think of. Again, I can give more on the view of personally living in a strongly Republican area. The inter, intra-party Republican squabbles among them, and the effect of this area upon Muskie's candidacy and his elections, in changing their attitude toward being a Democrat. Even though it still is, only the minority are still Democrats, but all around us Democrats have won and Muskie changed people's attitude toward admitting.

Uh, may I make one more comment along that line, in the middle of my peroration here? A student I had from Dover-Foxcroft told me once: I was going home for vacation, and these two sisters lived together. And as the student was visiting with these two older sisters, they probably were in their sixties, a neighbor came in and said, "Is Nellie, isn't Nellie here?" And the other sister said, "No, she's out right now." And then the, after the neighbor had gone, the sister turned to the college student and said, "Well actually, she's gone to a Democratic rally, but he doesn't need to know that." So there was that feeling, whenever that was, and maybe there's still, at least, even though Farmington ordinarily does not vote Democratic, although it will do so sometimes. Muskie's candidacy, Muskie's service, did change the attitude of people toward being a Democrat, toward admitting they were Democrat, and at least toward admitting occasionally that they voted Democratic.

AL: Do you think that's the most important, or long standing thing that Muskie will be known for? Or what do you find was most influential about Muskie?

GR: Of course, I liked the things that he stood for, and his acts on the pollution issue to me, is tremendously important. Again, I suppose personally, nothing affected me so much as building up the power of the Democrats in Maine so that they could be in a point where later they would get to control the legislature. And from rendering them as harmless, as bad shape as they were in 1950, to a position where they have been at times of some power. Personally, that's my greatest feeling about Muskie, along with it. I, he supported, nearly all the things he supported were nearly always the things I believed in. And in such things like environment for one, he made a tremendous contribution.

AL: And how did you get to know Don Nicoll? Do you remember when you met him? Through an academic avenue possibly?

GR: I don't know. And I think if I thought, I could remember. It may have been when we served, I served at various times on some committees that were going to remake state government, which we probably never did. And it may have been on one of them that I first knew him. Or he may have been a friend of Al Pease, who was an active Democrat. I don't

know, but I've known him for a long while. Oh yes, and Don has come here and spoken sometimes. My guess is just through mutual friends in the Democratic Party or in serving on some committee, that I first got to know him.

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

GR: Well, it was all very pleasant.

End of Interview