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Interview with William J. “Bill” Smith by Andrea L’Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Smith, William J. “Bill”

Interviewer

L’Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

February 18, 2004

Place

Augusta, Maine

ID Number

MOH 424

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Biographical Note

William J. “Bill” Smith was born December 28, 1942 in Van Buren, Maine and grew up there. He graduated from Boston College and Georgetown Law School, then served in the Army for two years, spending one year in Vietnam. Upon returning to Van Buren, he worked in Elmer Violette’s law firm. His mother is John Martin’s sister, making John his uncle, although they are only one year apart in age. At the time of this interview in 2004, Smith was serving in the Maine Legislature as a representative from Van Buren.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Elmer Violette and his work on the Allagash Waterway bill; John Martin and the influence of Claude Martin and Elmer Violette; and the Van Buren, Maine area.

Indexed Names

Cohen, William S.

Harding, Floyd

Levesque, Emilien
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Smith, Loretta (Martin)
Smith, Margaret Chase, 1897-1995
Violette, Elmer

Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Bill Smith on February the 18th, the year 2004 at the State House in Augusta, Maine, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Bill, could you start just by giving me your full name?

William Smith: My name is William J. Smith. I live in Van Buren, Maine. I've lived there all my life. I'll let you pick up from there.

AL: Sure, and what's your date of birth?

WS: December 28th, 1942.

AL: And what was Van Buren like when you were growing up?

WS: Van Buren was a town of about, oh, five thousand people when I was growing up. It was a French, basically French speaking town. It was a merchant center for farms, outlying farms in the other towns. So it was fairly busy as far as the merchants were concerned.

AL: Now, you were a WWII baby.

WS: I guess you might put it that way, yeah.

AL: Did your parents have recollections of the Great Depression? Did it affect that part of Maine?

WS: Certainly did. The community was not a wealthy community by any means, and I'm sure that during the Great Depression it was even poorer than it was, so.

AL: Now, growing up in Van Buren, what were some of your interests as you went through school?

WS: Well, you're talking in high school and such? Van Buren always had plenty; we had the woods and the fields so fishing was available. In winter time, during the time I was growing up, there was kind of a, we had developed a ski area and that filled up the winter quite well. I had participated in building that as a teenager and was on ski patrol and all that sort of thing at the

time.

AL: And after high school where did you go?

WS: When I grew up, Van Buren had two high schools, they had the Van Buren Boys High which was run by Marist fathers, and you had the Good Shepherd High School which was run by the Good Shepherd sisters. So girls were with the nuns and the boys were with the priests.

AL: And did you go to college after that?

WS: I went on to Boston College and after four years there I went on to Georgetown Law School and spent three years in Washington, D.C.

AL: And what years, was that, in the sixties?

WS: Yes, that was in the sixties. I graduated from law school in 1967. And after graduating from law school I went to work for Elmer Violette for a year before, about a year before I went in the Army. And I was in the Army for approximately two years. I spent a year in Vietnam, came back in January of 1970, and went straight to work for Elmer. And I had passed the bar and become a lawyer back in 1967.

AL: And what, what were your experiences like working for Elmer? What kind of a person was he?

WS: He was a good, honest man with a lot of integrity. As a lawyer his skills probably were more on the administrative side, and also in the office work he did. It left the field wide open for me to do, get into the trial work side which gave me a lot of chances to develop. Also, when I went with Elmer he was still involved in politics at the state level, and then later on he ran for the first district seat, congressional seat with, against Billy Cohen, and he lost of course, but that consumed some time. So my time with Elmer in the law office was until, from 1970 until 1973 when he became a superior court judge.

AL: Did you get involved in his campaign at all, or were you just -?

WS: I was doing the work in the office. No, I wasn't involved in his campaigning at all.

AL: Your background, your parents, were either of them Franco-American?

WS: My father was mostly Irish. You know, with ancestry of Smith and Keagan, and such names in the family. My mother was a Martin originally for Eagle Lake, and that would be the French side of the family.

AL: Now, is she a sister to John Martin?

WS: Yes, my mother, Loretta, is a sister to John Martin.

AL: And so you had a lot of politics in your family.

WS: Not particularly. My folks weren't that involved, were not involved in politics and Eagle Lake is, we weren't that, we were fairly remote from Eagle Lake. John grew up with the politics in Eagle Lake.

AL: Did he influence you at all in becoming a state representative?

WS: I wanted to be a state representative probably because of my contact with Elmer and also my contact with John. Elmer never suggested that, well I had spoken down there about running and he passed away the year I was elected. He continued to be a good close friend of mine throughout, and as a matter of fact I did a lot of his legal work that he wanted done, you know. He'd come back to me for that. So he was happy I was running and it's one of the things I regretted is that I didn't have a chance to talk more with him after I had been elected because he passed away in May of 2000.

As far as John, I've always had a lot of contact with John in the sense that he used the services of my law office quite a bit, but John never tried to influence me to get in, but it's something I always wanted to do because of these people I knew.

AL: Did Elmer ever talk about his time campaigning with Ed Muskie in the 50s?

WS: What Elmer would tell me about is what it was like when the Democrats were a minority party and how things started to reverse themselves in the fifties when Ed Muskie, well actually early sixties I think when Ed Muskie first came on, and how they developed the Democratic agenda, I guess, starting in 1964 when the Democrats first gained majority control. So there was quite a few stories from Elmer about that, and I found it very interesting. He also shared with me information about how they came to pass the Allagash Waterway Bill and got the landowners' support for the state to develop that important part.

AL: Forgive me, because I forget the dates in terms of when you were in his office, but were you working with him when he ran against Margaret Chase Smith?

WS: No, well, I'm trying to think. No, that was just before I came back with him. I think he ran against Margaret Chase Smith in '66, and he had made a very impressive showing at that time and had gained a lot of recognition in the state, and respect throughout the state for showing he'd made.

AL: And could you talk a little bit about John Martin's background and getting interested in politics?

WS: I've known John all my life. John is a year older than I am, so we made frequent visits, my mother would frequently visit Eagle Lake so I've known John as a contemporary for many, many years. There is one thing I think of very fondly, was that politics was part of the Martin persona in Eagle Lake more than And John had an uncle, Claude Martin, who was, I think, a representative or state senator at various times. And John in his early years would work for his uncle Claude, which was a store where people would gather and politics would be discussed, and

I'm sure that's where John really got into the political interests. So that is probably what brought John more into politics, and he sort of grew up in it really, you know, with his uncle Claude.

AL: Did you ever know Claude, which would have been -?

WS: My impressions of Claude, very personable man, he was a good businessman, no doubt a very good politician.

AL: Now, how was he related to you?

WS: He would have been my mother's uncle.

AL: So your great uncle. And do you remember what years Claude served in the state legislature?

WS: In the fifties.

AL: In the fifties.

WS: Yeah, and probably in the forties, too.

AL: I was thinking, because Ed Muskie was in the legislature from forty-six

WS: I can remember Claude running for state senator in about the middle fifties from posters put up in my dad's machine shop.

AL: Well, is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think is important to add?

WS: Well, if you're talking about Elmer Violette, he had, he was such a decent honest person that he could develop respect from opposing sides, and it was those qualities that led him to be very, very effective in the legislature. And you know, frankly, I think he deserves full credit for such landmark legislation as the Allagash Wilderness Waterway. No one else would have been able to bring the landowners to the table and develop the kind of compromises needed. You know, a more aggressive, abrasive kind of people would never have achieved the result that Elmer did. He was tremendously able in terms of his ability to develop the political compromises and agreements from parties that would start out very far apart. I also practiced law in front of Elmer when he was a judge; he was a judge obviously from 1973 through, well, into the nineties when he finally retired. And you know, as a superior judge, again, you'd characterize the work he was doing, he cared about people. He was a compassionate man in understanding people. He was a good judge but he wanted to be very, very careful that he was making the right decision, so.

AL: Did you know of the relationship between John Martin and Elmer?

WS: John Martin, Elmer and some other, what was interesting in the 1960s is that the leadership, the Democrats had finally taken control and the leadership in the legislature was

coming from Aroostook County Democrats. So you had people like Elmer, who was in the senate at that time, Floyd Harding, Emilien Levesque, I believe, might have been majority leader. And so these, there was a very tight group of Aroostook county Democrats who had quite a bit of control in the legislature in the sixties. And that's what, that's where from that John Martin grew.

AL: Would you say that Elmer in some ways was a mentor to John Martin as he entered?

WS: I'm sure he was, I'm sure he was. Any of the softer side of John Martin would have been learned from Elmer, or the more compromising side, whatever there is of that that exist. That would have been Elmer's influence, because of Elmer's style and all that. But, you know, John is a, as the master parliamentarian and such, that's John Martin by himself and him being a student of the legislature probably from the day he was born.

AL: Is there anything else?

WS: There may well be but it's very hard to think of it right now. If there's any areas you want to try and develop more just tell me and I'll -

AL: Okay, great, thank you.

End of Interview