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Interview with Elaine (Swanholm) Clinton Shortall Storer by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Storer, Elaine (Swanholm) Clinton Shortall

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

October 2, 2002

Place

Thomaston, Maine

ID Number

MOH 375

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Biographical Note

Elaine (Swanholm) Clinton Shortall Storer was born November 20, 1929 in Thomaston, Maine. Her parents were both immigrants from Norway. She has an older brother and a younger sister and two children. Elaine worked as a secretary in Frank Coffin's congressional office in Washington, D.C.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Norwegian immigrants; father's story of making it to the United States; Frank Coffin; Don Nicoll; Thomaston and Rockland, Maine communities; working for Frank Coffin in Washington, D.C.; Muskie-Payne TV debate; and sexual harassment of women.

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Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Elaine Storer at her home in Thomaston, Maine, on October the 2nd, the year 2002, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could you start by giving me your full name and spelling any of those names that need spelling?

Elaine Storer: Yes, my maiden name was Swanholm, S-W-A-N-H-O-L-M, and then I was married to a lawyer in Texas whose name was Houston Clinton, and then I was married to a Naval officer who was Commander Keith T. Shortall of Seattle, and then I was married to Alfred Storer of Rockland, who is now deceased.

AL: And where and when were you born?

ES: I was born here in Thomaston on Thatcher Street on November 20th, 1929.

AL: And is that where you grew up?

ES: Yes.

AL: In, did you say Rockland?

ES: No, Thomaston.

AL: Right in Thomaston.

ES: On Thatcher Street. And then we moved to Eliot Street when I was fifteen.

AL: So you're familiar with this area.

ES: Yes, quite.

AL: And what was it like growing up in Thomaston during those years?

ES: Well, it was during the Depression and nobody had any money, and we were all struggling. And my parents came from Norway, so it was doubly hard for them because they were learning the language. But we made it through and succeeded, and so, you know, did what you had to.

AL: You mentioned your parents. Tell me about where they came from?

ES: My mother was from Brevik, Norway, and her father was a sea captain. And my father was, his father was a Lutheran minister, and they moved around a lot, but he was born in, let me see if I can, no, I don't have that right now. But anyway, he lived mostly around Tranøy in Norway, and then his parents, well they went wherever the father had got a church, so he lived around, around the neighborhood of Tranøy.

AL: And he decided to come to Canada, and then the United States?

ES: Yes.

AL: How old was he?

ES: Well, let me see, how old was he. He left Norway in 1919 and went to sea, he joined the Navy in 1920 and returned back home in 1921. By the way, he was born in 1900, so you can tell how old he was. Then in 1923 he attended a community college where he, quote, "counted money" end quote, in a bank for three months, and I guess he was quite bored with that. So they headed for Africa and ended up in Antwerp, Belgium. He took a job on a steamer in Liverpool, and in 1924 he boarded a steamer to Halifax, Nova Scotia. And he left the ship and stayed with some Frenchmen in a lumber camp. He then took a train to Calais and walked a log jam at night.

In other words, he got over to this country from Canada by walking on some logs that were jammed up in the river there. He stayed at a fish house where he dried off and continued to walk until he heard digging. He offered money for some food at a tar paper shack where a wife gave

him fish, tea, and biscuits, and she told him how to go down to Route 1. And he headed for Bangor but could not find any work, and was told to go to Rockland. He thumbed a ride to Belfast and spent the night in a police station because the sergeant had friends in Norway. And when he left there, they asked him where he was from and he told them Norway, and he said, well I might as well tell them because they'll send me back anyway. And they said, "Norway," and they said, "oh, that's a nice town." He didn't know there was a town by that name here.

So anyway, he got down to Camden and he was dropped off by, picked up by some salesman, and then my great uncle was called to come and interpret for him, because he was also from Norway. So he picked him up and took him to his home in Rockport. And that's where my mother was staying at the time, and that's how they met. They didn't know each other in Norway, although my grandfather christened my mother over there, but she didn't know my father over there. I thought that was interesting. So that's how he got here.

AL: And what did he do for work?

ES: Well, he was a carpenter. Yup. So then he got, this is quite long but I don't know, in 19-, it was the Depression and he worked for Glover's, which was a building, construction company in Rockland, and they added an addition on the junior high school. Then he worked down here for Newell McLean on Thatcher Street in a boat shop, and that's when they bought the house there on Thatcher Street. Then he went to Bucksport in 1930 and got sick with typhoid fever and double pneumonia and was critically ill. But he went back to Glover's and he gave him a job laying floors, but then he contracted neuralgia in the face from the cold and his weakened condition. So then he went to work later, a month or two later, at the Stowe shipyard, and back to Glover's, and then he worked for his brother-in-law, Tom Anderson, who was a contractor. So he managed to keep food on the table even though he was ill and run down. But he worked, then he had his own construction company.

AL: Later.

ES: In later years.

AL: So he did fully recover from the illnesses.

ES: Yes. He was, he had paralysis on one side of his face, but it wasn't critical. I mean, it didn't, I mean you could see when he smiled that one side didn't move, but it wasn't bad, you know.

AL: And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

ES: I have an older brother who is Roy Swanholm, and my sister is Signa Swanholm Kelsey Gardiner. He's twenty months older, and she's fifteen months younger, so we were very close in age.

AL: And was your mother a housewife, or did she ever work outside the home?

ES: Mostly a housewife. She worked a little bit up to, there used to be a clothing factory up here called J. B. Pierson's. And she worked up there briefly sewing the, mostly, oh, then she sold Spencer corsets in later years, door to door she'd go and, after she learned to drive. Then she never stayed home. But after we grew up she did that, she sold Spencer corsets.

AL: And what was the Thomaston community like in terms of, you know, economically, what were the biggest business in town, and socially what did you do for entertainment?

ES: Well, we had two factories and some shipyards. We had J.B. Pierson, as I said, out by the prison, and over here was Black & Gay, and that was a canning factory, and a lot of people worked there. And then we had boat shops down here, Mosset's boat shop. And we had kilns. I don't, they weren't doing much with those kilns back when I was a child, but. And the social life was, we'd go to each other's homes, and they had the DAR and the social groups for, well they were, I can't remember, well, like the grange.

AL: So they had a grange in town?

ES: Yeah, yeah. And the Pithian Sisters and the Orient Lodge, the Masons and, so that was their entertainment mostly, and we had a bowling alley in the Masonic temple, a lot of people went bowling.

AL: Was there a, was church a big place for people to meet in town?

ES: Yes, yeah. It was a lot busier then than it is now.

AL: Were there, was there a lot of diversity in religion and churches here, or was it pretty -?

ES: No, people were left pretty much to themselves. We had an active Catholic church, still do, and Episcopalian, Baptist, and ours was, is called the Federated Church, but in 1929 the Congregational church which was on Main Street, and the Methodist church which is down on Hilo Street, merged because they couldn't afford to operate independently. And so we used to go to the Congregational church in the summer time because it was warm, and that was a huge big church and it was too expensive to heat.

And then in the fall we would move down to Hilo Street to the other church, and go there all winter. And I happened to be the first child to be christened in there in 1929, so that was quite something. After they merged, because I was only a month old I guess. I was christened in December, around Christmas time.

AL: And what was it like, do you have a sense of what it was like in Thomaston politically. Were they Republicans, Democrats?

ES: Yes, I do. Oh no, they were Republicans. Not much room for Democrats in those days.

AL: No. How, in what ways do you remember that? Are there certain instances?

ES: Well, I remember, I don't remember too much of it when I was a child, but as an adult I can remember trying to caucus up at Watt's Hall and we couldn't get enough to even bother to open it. And one time there were three Democrats, and of course the Republicans were full, but we caucused down in the hallway. And one was Jim Mayo, who was Joe Mayo's father, and me, and I can't remember the third one, but there were only three of us that showed up. And it was kind of scary because people didn't like Democrats, and you just didn't run around bragging about it. But we did a lot of work. I mean, I knew some Democrats behind the scenes.

AL: Would this have been in the late forties, or early fifties?

ES: This would have been probably in the late fifties, because I was working at Central Maine Power Company in Rockland in 1957 when a Democratic woman in Rockland whom I knew, of course I knew all the Democrats, there weren't that many, she came in and asked me if I'd want to go to work in Washington for Frank Coffin. And she told, she said, "I talked to Don Nicoll," or Don had called her, asked her to find somebody from the coast that was a secretary and capable and whatnot, so she came down to see me. And I thought, 'well, that would be fun', because my daughter was ready to start school and I wanted to make a move before she enrolled.

So I interviewed [with] Don, he came down, we talked, and he hired me, and I went to Washington in June and found a place to live. So we moved down in August I think it was, and I started to work for Frank and Don, and the other ones in there were, Libby Donahue wrote the speeches, and I don't know if you ever knew Midge Bouvier, she was in there.

AL: We've interviewed her.

ES: You have? Yeah. So we had a good group, and that's how I ended up going down there and being with him, but that's how I got started in politics.

AL: Well, how did you become a Democrat in such a Republican town? It's always interesting to find out where that came from.

ES: After I went to work for Frank, I came back home and enrolled and they, of course they had to let you enroll, I mean they couldn't keep you from being a Democrat if you wanted to. So I did. Oh, I want to back up, too, on something, speaking of Frank.

AL: Sure.

ES: That when my father finally did get over here, he lived all his life for fear that he would be deported because he didn't have his citizenship papers. So when I worked for Frank I told him that. And he said, "Oh, I can fix that, I can introduce a private bill." So he did, and my father got his citizenship papers after, you know, twenty years. So he didn't have to worry about getting deported anyway. So that was neat.

AL: How did you like working with Frank Coffin?

ES: Oh, he was wonderful. Had a great sense of humor and, I don't know, if you made a

mistake he made light of it, you know, he didn't make a big issue of it. He was very, still is I guess, I haven't seen him for a while, but has a wonderful sense of humor. As you know, Ed Muskie was much more serious than Frank. Frank was smart, but he saw, he could see the funny side of things, whereas Ed, I think, was so serious, at least when I was around him. He could get very irritable about things. And so they were different in that respect, but they were close friends and helped each other a lot.

AL: Now, when you went to Washington with Frank Coffin, was everyone in the office pretty new to how things worked?

ES: Yes, well they had been there a while. I can't remember when he was elected; I think it must have been in '56. And I went down in '57, so they'd been there for a while, but I think they needed more help because he was getting so busy. And, oh, I'm sure it took him a while to catch on, but a lot of people were helpful to us. I mean, you met so many well known people. And Libby knew a lot of people, politicians, that used to come in and talk to her, they'd help her with speech material. So it was pretty interesting I thought, I enjoyed it. Jack Kennedy used to pop in, and he, I don't know, he's like everybody else, you know. Jimmy Roosevelt. Frank was on the foreign affairs committee, so he knew a lot of people who were in foreign affairs and that was interesting, they used to come to the office and we listened to the conversation, you know. So I don't know, we knew a lot of fascinating people.

AL: Yes.

ES: Be hard to replace. I mean, that's the place to be if you're interested in politics.

AL: And you mentioned the person who connected you with Don Nicoll about interviewing for the position, what was her name? Do you recall?

ES: I'm trying to think. Champlin, her last name was Champlin. I think it was, her husband's name was June, which was unusual for a man, and her name was Joan [*sic* Joyce] I think, but -

AL: Something similar to that?

ES: Something Champlin that Don had called. She was active behind the scenes. We were able to finally get a pretty good strong party going, but it took quite a while.

AL: What was it like working with Don Nicoll in Frank's office?

ES: Well, Don was, as you know, he's very serious about what he does and he's very conscientious. So I enjoyed working with him because I knew what he put out was good stuff. And of course his children were little too, at that time and he was busy with them. But the last time I saw him was at Ed Muskie's funeral and he looked good and we had a good time reminiscing. And my son was born while I worked for him, and he's now the news director on Maine Public Radio. So at least Don knew where I was through him, I guess, because my name had changed and I didn't keep in touch. But anyway.

AL: Did you observe when Ed Muskie became senator how his office started? Were you still in Washington?

ES: Yes.

AL: When he became senator? What I'm wondering is did you see how his office was set up and how it was different from Frank Coffin's?

ES: Well, I was in there, I had been in there, but, of course he had more staff and I didn't know a lot of them. I was always also in Margaret Chase Smith's office, but they were set up differently, and I wasn't in there that much. I saw more of Muskie when he was in Lewiston running for the Senate than I did after he got in. So, as I told Don in my letter, I remembered Frank trying to coach him because he had to, he had an interview, a debate, he had to debate Fred Payne on TV, who was the incumbent senator from Maine, a Republican.

And so we, I don't know why, I guess I was there because Frank, they wanted me to take it in shorthand and transcribe it so he could take it with him to the studio because he was going on the air at eight o'clock I think it was. So Frank tried to tell him what to, how to, what was going on, because he hadn't been to Washington. So Frank coached him in the foreign affairs field. And he took, I transcribed what they had been talking about, he took it with him, and he ran circles around Fred Payne and we were all so pleased that he did so well, because Payne had been there, you know, one term anyway. So he did very well and came out with flying colors, so that was quite an experience. Libby was there with me that night, so we were quite excited about that.

AL: And that was the first time they had television for a political campaign, right?

ES: Oh yeah, yeah, that was a big thing. And I don't think a lot of people had seen Muskie because he probably had just been to the big cities. I don't think, you know, and they'd never seen him on TV, so yeah, that was quite a thing. And he, you know, being so tall and slow, he put on a nice appearance and he always, you know, pat you on the back or puts his arm around you. He was just very affable and pleasant. And so it was nice that people could see him that way, and I think it helped him a lot. He did well in that race, and from then on, I mean, he was Mr. Democrat. I remember a few others in the Congress, but I can't remember now what their names were, from Maine. I'd have to look it up.

AL: Oh, from Maine, the Maine delegation?

ES: Yeah.

AL: Cliff McIntire?

ES: Well he was Republican.

AL: Yeah.

ES: I think there was one from, a Democrat, but I, I don't know.

AL: I'm thinking of Margaret Chase Smith and Cliff McIntire who were both Republicans. And Stan Tupper was a Republican, but a very moderate one, would you say?

ES: Yes, he was.

AL: Did you know him, being from his area?

ES: I knew him vaguely, not well. And then, let's see, Ken Curtis was governor at the time, and then, I don't know.

AL: Bill Hathaway.

ES: Yeah, he came down.

AL: Peter Kyros.

ES: Yeah. Yeah, we had quite a crew there finally.

AL: Now you said you married a man from Texas. Did you know the Texas delegation?

ES: Well, he worked for Congressman Poage, W.R. Poage, P-O-A-G-E. He'd just gotten through law school and passed the Bar, and he hadn't started practicing so he, the reason I met him was he was up there working for Poage. And we both had rooms at the same boarding house, and ate supper one night, and I didn't know him and I didn't speak to him. And then we went out on the deck, because in those days everybody smoked, so we went out on the porch and had a cigarette. And he sat next to me in a rocking chair and asked me where I was from, I told him, so we just got acquainted. And we were married in the, let's see, that's in the fall, we were married in the following April, came up here and got married in the Federated Church and moved down there and he started practicing law.

And he ended up being an appellate court judge, so he, he's still living but he has Alzheimer's so he's in a nursing home type thing, doesn't even know our daughter, so. It's too bad, but he had an interesting life. But I just couldn't adjust to the climate down there, and the heat was unbelievable. And I was homesick. I was only twenty, nineteen when I married him. And then he was gone all the time he was practicing, for the government, he was a union lawyer, so he traveled all the time and it just, we just grew apart and I just thought, this isn't working. So I came back home and that's when I went to Washington.

AL: And did you know Jim Wright at all?

ES: I knew of him, yeah.

AL: But you didn't have interactions?

ES: But I knew Sam Rayburn quite well.

AL: Tell me about him.

ES: He was the speaker of the House for years, and of course used to, my husband knew him quite well. And one time Carol, my daughter, used to go to Texas usually every summer to be with her father and her grandmother. And one time she, she was six or seven, she was all alone and we hated to, I hated to send her on the plane alone, and so Sam Raven was going home and he said he'd take care of her, so he did. She went all the way down with him. So that was nice. So yeah, that Texas delegation was a big one, so I got to know a lot of them personally.

Then I met Keith who, when I was working for Frank, Keith was our Navy liaison officer so he used to come in to see if I had any cases that he could help me with, so that's how I met him. And we were married for twenty-two years. He retired and moved up here and was manager of the Sherwin Williams Company in Rockland, and then he got mixed up with a woman who worked for him, so we got a divorce and then after six months or so he died. So then I married this third husband whom I hadn't seen for thirty years, I knew him in high school, and he moved back here from Massachusetts, so. We had a wonderful time together, and he died five years ago so I've been alone ever since, but try to get used to it. It's not easy.

AL: Now, are any of the, is any of the furniture in your home things that your father made? Did he make furniture?

ES: Yes, he did. There's a table in the dining room that he made out of cherry wood that was a showcase at Center Crane's in Rockland, that store, and apparently they didn't want it, so he took it and made this table for my mother out of it, and I've still got it. And there are probably other things here, Andrea, but I, as I look around, but -

AL: That's nice to have.

ES: Yes, it is, yeah.

AL: When you, you knew who Muskie was and you followed what he did, I'm sure, over the years. What is it that you remember about him that sticks out the most? Maybe what he did for the state of Maine, or for the country?

ES: Oh yeah, I think he, well, he did an awful lot and I think for the laborer, the people, working people. And of course I related to him because his parents came from Europe, too, and he just came from the same kind of background. Yeah, I think he helped a lot of people, the average person who didn't come from money like the Republicans did. And as I say, I mostly remember him being around here, not as much after he went to Washington, I kind of lost touch with him, outside of correspondence.

Once in a while I, after I married Keith we moved back here and, well of course Coffin was defeated and he moved back here, and so we moved back, and then I kind of lost touch with what Ed Muskie was doing down that way. But when he was speaking up here anywhere, I always went to listen to what he was doing, and so I know he was very active.

AL: Have you stayed involved locally with Democratic politics over the years?

ES: I have, yeah, I ran for the legislature one year and I lost by two hundred votes, but it was worth a try. And, yeah, I have. And Jim Mayo, as I said, was very active and I tried to work with him and his son Michael who is still, you know, in his fifties now. And of course Joe Mayo who died of, what did he have?

AL: Lou Gehrig's.

ES: Lou Gehrig's disease, yeah. He was in my son's class, and so I knew him very well. So yeah, we try to stay active, I do. And my daughter and son.

AL: Do they live locally?

ES: Well, my daughter lives in Waldoboro and she works, she's a social worker at Winwood Gardens in Camden, that nursing home. And my son, as I say, is the news director of Maine Public Radio, so he lives in Portland. But I, you know, he comes home fairly, you know, as much as he can.

AL: You said that when Ed Muskie was running for the Senate for the first time, Frank Coffin helped sort of test him and prepare him for his debate with Fred Payne. Is that, did you ever see any other times when they did that with each other? Did they debate things together?

ES: Well, I think that when Ed was running, you know, he was governor then and he needed Frank's input. Yeah, they discussed quite a lot together. I don't remember the detail like I do that night, because I didn't take a lot of it in shorthand. But I remember that because it, I had to transcribe it so fast. But yes, they worked a lot together.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think is important to talk about?

ES: Well, I'm trying to think what would be relevant. No, I can't think of anything else.

AL: I have a question. Do you have a sense of how the Maine delegation worked when it was Frank Coffin and Margaret Chase Smith and Cliff McIntire? Did they communicate a lot, did they get along?

ES: Yeah, I think they did. Margaret Chase Smith was a straight shooter, you know, she was very above board and very honest, and she didn't play games. And Cliff McIntire was, as far as I know, I mean I think he was a straight shooter. Yeah, I think they got along good. I think after they got some more Democrats in, they could build, you know, and have a little stronger front there. But that took some time. But it was quite fascinating. There were a lot of ladies men there that I was fascinated with the way they could flirt with women and go out with women and they were married. A lot of southern congressmen did that in those days. And I don't think, I don't remember any probably with ours, but some of them had, you know, pretty strong reputations. I won't say who they were, but that was kind of interesting.

AL: So it was obvious to you, you knew who they were?

ES: I think everybody did, but they didn't care. And yet they were married, and I just felt bad for their families, you know. But they were, some were quite friendly and, you know, in those days it wasn't, surprise you, for somebody to come up and hug you and kiss you that you didn't even know, because they, well of course I was young then, so you just had to get used to being pinched or hugged or, you know, which women wouldn't tolerate today.

AL: No.

ES: That was quite common in those days.

AL: Really.

ES: Yeah, it was. So, I remember after I was married to Houston, I worked for the Navy Department briefly and my boss asked me to work overtime. And I was naive; I didn't think anything of it. So he, after everybody left he locked all the doors and I got my shorthand book and waited for him to start dictating, and instead of that he came over and put his arms around me and I could see what was coming. So, no, it was before I married Houston, but I was going with him. So anyway, I was able to get out of there in one piece without being, you know, what's the word I want?

But after I got home I told Houston, and so the next day he went down and talked quite seriously to my boss and said that he would file suit if he did it, you know, if he did it again, molested me again. And so I never had any more trouble with him, but we left anyway to go to Texas. But that was quite common in those days. I don't know if it still is, because I'm not that age group, but I wouldn't think so.

AL: No, I don't think it's as common because all of the sexual harassment laws that there are now.

ES: Yes, precludes that.

AL: Yeah, probably deters it.

ES: Well that's good. But in those days you just had to take your chances and see what happened, you know. But I'm trying to think of any, I remember one party we had down here at the Coal Bin, it was called, and it was a restaurant down on the waterfront down here. And we had a fund raiser down there, and Ed was there, and I don't if you've ever heard of Bernard Langlais, the artist from Skowhegan? Well, he was in Bangor. Well he was there, because he lived in Cushing at the time, and his wife Helen came from Skowhegan, and he was a Democrat but he was quite a tease and he liked to agitate. So he got Muskie going on some issue, and Muskie thought he was serious so they got in quite a to-do then. And we kept trying to tell Muskie he was just kidding and that, he was so upset. So I remember that because I tried to calm him down. I finally did, but that was quite a, they really got into quite an argument. So he did

like to argue

AL: Did you ever experience Ed Muskie and Frank Coffin arguing?

ES: No.

AL: Or was it more of a friendly discussion?

ES: Well, it was more friendly, yeah. No, they were kind of like brothers, so they helped each other. I think Blackie just did that for kicks, you know, but he got him all riled up. But he got over it.

AL: Anything else?

ES: No, I don't think, I can't think of any more. I've tried to make notes of -

AL: Well this is wonderful, thank you very, very much.

ES: You're very welcome.

End of Interview