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Interview with Ann Twombly by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Twombly, Ann

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

May 22, 2000

Place

Augusta, Maine

ID Number

MOH 190

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Biographical Note

Ann Twombly was born August 8, 1944 in Arlington, Virginia. She moved to Monroe, Maine at age seven. Ann came from long time, active Maine Democratic family; her grandfather was Guy Twombly. She was a niece to Helen McAleney, cousin to Mary McAleney and sister to May Ellen Twombly.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: 1952-1954 Maine Democratic Party; 1954 Maine gubernatorial campaign; 1969-1972 presidential campaign; Muskie's environmental work; community history of Monroe and Vanceboro, Maine; Guy Twombly; Eben Elwell; George Mitchell's 1974 campaign; Rosa Parks at Clinton's 1992 inauguration; and Ed Muskie's 80th birthday party.

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Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Ann Twombly on May the 22nd, the year 2000 at the State Armory in Augusta, Maine. It is 9:00 A.M., and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. I'd just like to start by having you say your full name and spelling it for us.

Ann Twombly: Okay, my name is Ann Lanson Twombly, and Ann is without an E, and it's L-A-N-S-O-N, T-W-O-M-B-L-Y.

AL: And where and when were you born?

AT: I was born in Arlington, Virginia on the 8th of August in 1944.

AL: And where did you grow up?

AT: For the first seven plus years I lived in the Washington, D.C. area with my family, and then we moved to the home place in Monroe, Maine when I was starting in the third grade.

AL: And what was the Monroe community like?

AT: For somebody who had lived outside of Washington, D.C. it was magic. I didn't understand anything anybody said the first year because they had the Waldo County accent that I now have. I worked very hard for it. But it was a close-knit community, and we were considered

outsiders because my father had worked away and lived away from Waldo County for some years. We integrated fairly well.

AL: Who were some of the people in that community and in Waldo County that you knew when you were growing up? Some that were politically active?

AT: Oh, well, that's fairly close to home; that would be my grandfather Guy Twombly and his companion Phyllis Murphy. And they lived and breathed Democratic politics at a time when they were the only Democrats that I knew besides my parents, who were Democrats, but they weren't active as such because my father was involved with the federal government and was hijacked, so he couldn't, and my mother didn't.

So my grandparents, essentially, were my first link, and the best part of it was that we lived, as I say, on the home place in Munroe and the building next to the house was what we called the old cider mill where my grandfather still pressed cider every fall. And that's how we got to meet anybody who was anybody in Democratic politics is they came there for. It was a nice gathering place, and you could sit around and talk about almost everything with whomever came to pick up their cider. And if they weren't there, my grandfather and Phyllis always were, and they were wonderful company. So as kids my sister Mary Ellen and I used to spend a lot of time out there and got to see a lot of folks.

AL: Did your grandfather, to your recollection, ever talk about where he got such a strong sense of being a Democrat?

AT: The earliest stories I remember, I mean I grew up in a family where both sides of the equation were free thinkers, not just my dad's side of the family but my mother's as well. My grandfather and my grandmother, whom I never knew, started their married life dabbling in being Socialists. And when that didn't quite go anywhere after the early part of the century, they moved on into Democratic politics. And my grandmother's side of the family had some activists. I couldn't now tell you whether they were, I don't know whether they were Democrats or Republicans, but my great-great-grandfather served as the governor during the insurrection. I think it was the Civil War fighters wanted their money and they closed out the state government for two or three days, and he was president of the senate and acted in that stead for a period of time. So as I say, there have been (*unintelligible word*) in the family for a long time.

AL: Do you recall his name?

AT: I should have brought you the *Inkwell*; it has all the story. He was a Lanson.

AL: Okay.

AT: I'd have to dig back, but it's in the folklore. And my grandparents both were very active. My grandmother was county chairwoman, had the Democratic ladies of the county, which were probably about four, used to come, and she'd hold gatherings at the house, the house that we grew up in. And so it was always just part of the fabric of who we were. They went to conventions. And after my grandmother died Phyllis was one of the few Democratic women in

the county and had a wonderful sense of humor, and my grandfather hitched up with her and had a wonderful time.

And one of the nice things about a family history like this is my cousin Mary wore to Clinton's inaugural ball the dress that my grandmother made to go to the Chicago convention in the thirties. So, and we have it packed away for the next generation, and maybe my granddaughter Lydia will wear it next at a Democratic high function or something.

Somewhere there are some letters, I don't know whether Mary has them or where they are in the family, but some letters that my grandfather had written and spoke of this young smart starting out Democrat. He may have mailed it to my folks in the late forties when they were in the D.C. area, but did mention Mr. Muskie at that time. So even before I'd met him he was a name I'd heard.

AL: Right. And when did you meet him? Do you have a -?

AT: I don't know that I have a specific, when I specifically met him, but the first time that I can put a, kind of a time frame to it was, we went to Brooks, which is the next town over from Munroe where my grandfather was living at the time. He'd arranged for a supper, and it was upstairs above the movie theater. And we had a great dinner there; that was some occasion. I think back now, it probably when Mr. Muskie was running for governor, and of course we were quite little kids. That would have been the mid-fifties, so I was maybe a teenager or so. And I think my grandfather and former father-in-law were like the few heads of the party and the audience, or actually putting it together, so they probably introduced Mr. Muskie, and I can remember thinking from a short perspective what a great, tall, impressive man he was with this enormous booming voice and a nice sense of humor that even a kid could understand. So, he scored points with the younger generation.

So I think that's my earliest memory. He may have been at the cider mill at some point or time or another because as I say everybody who was running for office, including people who ran for office, was it Mr. Oliver from way over in the western part of the state when there were three districts -

AL: Jim Oliver.

AT: Three districts in the state of Maine for congress, and he was there, so I would imagine that Mr. Muskie came as well.

AL: Now you, during the '54 campaign, that is the year that Muskie ran for governor and won. Do you have recollections of that campaign at all? A sense of, not from you remembering specifics but maybe from your family being active during that campaign and a sense of what they thought of him and what was going to happen?

AT: Mostly it was an enormous wave of enthusiasm. There was a real, a real sense that there was this superior candidate, and he was our candidate, and that there were just going to be such enormous changes in how the state was going to be. It had always been so Republican, and that

was a saying that we were brought up on is if something went wrong, it had gone Republican. And nobody these days understands, except members of my family because we're such a wonderfully mixed state now, mostly Democratic power but a mix of power. And I can remember my grandfather being very, very excited about all of it, but I don't remember specifics more than that wonderful dinner where we all went over as a family.

There was just the promise that there was going to be so much different that went on, and it really encouraged other people, including my former father-in-law, to take a risk and go out and be a candidate and run for office because there was an opportunity there to make changes. And I think that was the big thing, was how different the state was going to be with Democrats making some of the policy decisions.

AL: Now your former father-in-law was an active Democrat as well?

AT: That's correct.

AL: So you married into Democrats.

AT: Well, it was almost, how to put this, it was a litmus test, it was kind of like you didn't marry outside the faith, so you didn't marry outside the party.

AL: Ah-ha.

AT: Probably, as you say, you've spoken with him, he's probably given you lots of details about -

AL: What is his name?

AT: Eben Elwell.

AL: Oh, okay.

AT: He probably gave you tons of information about what was going on in the fifties and sixties because that's when he really did a lot politically. And did a lot with Mr. Muskie, so he was, really felt connected.

AL: My next question is about your Aunt Helen. What are your memories of her when you were growing up, her activity and. I know that her husband worked for the government at one point so he couldn't be politically active, but did she remain active in state politics?

AT: That's not my memory because I think in Vanceboro, Maine to be politically active was kind of an oxymoron. I don't think you could be. Vanceboro, Maine was even smaller than Munroe and much more isolated. So my memories of her are basically more that she was very well read and current on all things political and could keep, hold her own in any conversations but not that she necessarily was involved in the Democratic party in any way, actively herself.

AL: So to go back to Munroe, that's where you went to public schools, in Munroe? And where did you go after high school? Did you stay in the area, or did you -?

AT: I went to Munroe for the grammar school years, went to Brooks because Munroe closed its high school where my mother had taught, my mother and (*unintelligible word*), they taught English, a few other courses as well. I went to Brooks to school, and that's where I met the Elwell family, married out of high school and worked and supported my former husband's education for a number of years here in the state of Maine. And then we went out of the state of Maine for several years as people tend to do even now and didn't come home until about 1970. So we were four or five years out of the state, mostly in the south.

AL: Did you enjoy coming back to Maine?

AT: I did, and I didn't. I had some real concerns about my kids' education.

AL: In the South, or in Maine?

AT: In the South, yeah. And we had put my older son, who was academically a very, very advanced soul, in private schools in the South that were ungraded. You had a homeroom of kids your own age, but you moved based on your ability, reading, math, science, those kinds of things. And I was kind of worried when we came back that we wouldn't find an equivalent and actually didn't find an equivalent. He had the basics, he had the basis to go from where he was, and he did very well. He graduated with honors from Bates some years ago. And my other kids went to the local school system and seemed to adjust fine. I had thought at one time of leaving Maine again, but that was more on personal reasons. It didn't have anything to do with the quality of life in Maine.

AL: When you were growing up, what do you think your family had as far as influences on you, things they instilled in you that later shaped your attitudes and beliefs?

AT: I think the biggest thing would be the fact that you accepted whomever you met as an individual in and of themselves, and you respected what you could of them even if you differed in opinion. If they had a sense of integrity and believed in what they were doing and what they were saying even if their view was different, it wasn't that you wrote them off, you respected that feature of them.

Oh, the usual things that people were indoctrinated with in the fifties. Duty and doing your very best and being loyal, first, I would say probably first to family and then to your state and country. It was really hard for me to become, in one sense it was really hard for me to become somebody who disapproved and disapproved publicly with the Vietnamese war for instance. That was a struggle because it was part of an institution, and you did your best by it, but. And you always participated, you couldn't gripe if you didn't involve yourself, so, yeah.

The year that Eben ran for congress I was nineteen going on twenty, I was not old enough to vote legally, and Eben was running for first congressional district I think. And Joe Bennett out of Old Town, didn't have any delegates from Stillwater, so my former husband and I went as delegates

even though we weren't of legal voting age. It was an absolutely fabulous time; we went to the Eastland Hotel in Portland, and Muskie was there, and of course Plato Truman, one great man with two great names or however that story went.

It was an interesting time and so I always was, when my kids were in school I was always active with kids' stuff and I've always been active until the last few years in Democratic politics. So, I guess you'd say I learned not to be an observer but to be a participator.

AL: So you've been active in campaigns?

AT: Absolutely.

AL: What, start with the first one, tell me a little bit about it.

AT: I'm not sure I can remember. Probably it was Eben's campaign for congress, probably was the first one. As I say I wasn't legally able to vote.

AL: Did you ever work on a Mitchell campaign or Brennan?

AT: Oh sure. Let me see, I think probably before Mitchell, of course, I worked for Muskie's campaign. Mostly was more active when we came back to Maine so the seventies and eighties and on up through.

AL: In what sorts of capacities did you work?

AT: Oh, strictly volunteer. For instance the year that Mr. Muskie ran for the presidency, '72? I was on a bus down to New Hampshire to help rally the troops on voting day. By then I was real busy, and there was a Democratic women's, Kennebec County Democratic Women's Group in addition to the county committee. I put a lot of time in on those. So yeah, I would say for Muskie, Mr. Hathaway, Mr. Kyros, oh boy, I am dating myself, aren't I?

AL: Did you work, when you worked on Peter Kyros, Sr.'s campaign, did you meet some of the younger, well, they would have been our contemporaries, Peter Kyros, Jr., and -?

AT: I don't remember that, no, not necessarily.

AL: Maybe you were in different areas campaigning?

AT: Maybe, I don't know.

AL: Did you work on George Mitchell's 1974 gubernatorial campaign?

AT: As a matter of fact I did.

AL: Any stories from that campaign? Was-

AT: Not specifically. That was the year that I ran for office as well; I ran for a county office.

AL: That was very early in George Mitchell's career.

AT: Yeah, he was my choice over Mr. Brennan, and he clearly would have been my choice over Mr. Longley. And we got Longley. That was a shock. I was, I was what they call grass roots, I guess you would say. I might possibly have gone to a Jefferson-Jackson Day meal kind of thing. I worked at the state Democratic headquarters, but I wasn't somebody who was out and around driving candidates places or anything. I was kind of a behind the scenes person, so I don't remember, I mean I probably saw George Mitchell at a lot things. But I think mostly what, what I remember about him was what an awkward candidate he was when he started. He was very uncomfortable standing up in front of people and talking, and it was very different from what you had from Mr. Muskie.

AL: You also must have seen Mitchell evolve over the years.

AT: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. And it's hard to say, I mean, I guess because there is such a link between my grandfather and Mr. Muskie that he, to me, is the pinnacle of Democratic politics in the state of Maine, and Mr. Mitchell certainly has done an enormous amount. I guess he comes in second in my heart of hearts as far as politics goes.

Because I don't know, he worked for a man who believed so strongly in leaving a legacy of, to me, a legacy of clean air and water. I think that for me those were the things that I respected most that Mr. Muskie did. He certainly did an enormous lot of other things, but that for me was very important because I had young kids and I was young myself and wanted, and had remembered how things were when I came home in the fifties as a little kid. And it was nice to think that they would go back so my kids would be able to see the same kinds of natural healthy beautiful things. And it's happened. So most, once in a while I get real complacent, but most of the time I remember to thank the person I think personally did it all, which isn't accurate but it's a nice way to sum it up, so.

But Mr. Mitchell, I had a wonderful experience. I was just telling a coworker when I said I was coming up to talk to you today, was, when my cousin Mary McAleney was his administrative assistant in Washington when Mr. Mitchell was the majority leader, we went over because she said, "Oh you've got to go over and have your picture taken with the senator." And I said, "Fine, okay, we'll go do it." So I put on my dress up outfit, over we went, and went into the majority leader's waiting rooms. And there was John Martin and Charlie Pray and Joe Mayo and, oh gosh, a whole crowd of people who represented power in the state of Maine, most of whom I knew because I had worked a legislative session or two with them.

And so they kind of, you know, "Oh hi," kind of thing. And they were kind of hanging, waiting, busy men that they were, you know, president of the senate in the state of Maine and speaker of the house in the state of Maine, and all of a sudden the door opened and Mary and I went through the door because we had an appointment, and they didn't. And they waited in the anteroom while we went in to meet the senator.

So it was kind of a nice turn of events for a local person. And went in and Mary introduced me as her cousin and, Ann Twombly, Ann. He said, "Twombly, hmm," and he thought about it for a minute, he said, "are you any relation," he said, "I remember an old gent from Waldo county," he said, "were you related to Guy Twombly?" Now, my grandfather had been dead more than thirty years by then, I know he had, and Mr. Mitchell pulled that out of his back pocket somewhere, and I said well you're looking at two of his granddaughters. And he'd never realized that Mary was a Twombly, not by name but by birth. So he got a great chuckle out of that, and I have a lovely picture of the three of us just kind of laughing about it at the time.

And then of course we swept out as anybody would past all the high Maine muckies and, "Tootles," away we went. So that was kind of neat.

And I remember Mitchell and Muskie together because the last time I saw the senator was at Clinton's inauguration. And Mary had made arrangements for us, my husband and myself, to come down and be part of that whole week of excitement, and I don't think ever in my lifetime I'll ever spend such a fun week as we did seeing everything. And one of the great highlights was, we sat on the Capitol steps above where the inauguration was taking place, and off to our right I can remember the senator and his wife, his son brought them in.

We have several pictures of them in our inauguration album. And I was almost as thrilled about seeing him there and seeing the senator, the current senator then, Mitchell, down on the dais or whatever you call it with his sister for the inauguration.

But one of the biggest thrills of my life of that week was, as we sat there in the front row closest to looking over the edge at the proceedings, oh, kind of the security guards came and said could we move a little closer together because he had some people he wanted to seat. And I looked up and he had Rosa Parks and one of her family members, I don't know, granddaughter or niece or someone with her to keep her company. And she sat next to me, and I shook her hand and I kept saying, "I'm never going to wash this hand again, ever." Because she was such a part of magic history for me, not only for blacks but for women, and it just had kind of, it was like who would ever imagine that I would meet somebody like that, too. It was perfectly okay that I had seen Mr. Muskie and Mr. Mitchell through my lifetime because they were national heroes too, but this was an icon and it was just amazing. So it was a fabulous exciting day and week that all happened.

AL: That was in 1992?

AT: Yeah, the first inauguration. It was wonderful, and we had a grand time, and that's where Mary wore that beautiful dress of my grandmother's. So, just magic. I should have brought the book so you could have seen how gorgeous she was.

AL: I bet she was. And you said you were politically active up until a few years ago? Is that because of your job, your current job, or just too busy?

AT: Um, different priorities. All the time I lived in Kennebec County, which was, gee, looking back on it probably a good portion of my adult life, I was very politically active. And

we moved to Lincoln county, '86, and I never was as connected with people down there, so I was, I have been town chair in my town for many years but basically we have two of us that show up for caucuses unless it's an exciting year where Jerry Brown is running and then all the hippies that still live in Whitefield come out en masse and speak his name and so on and so forth.

But no, it hasn't been as much a part of my life for the last few years. Maybe it'll be a retirement hobby again, who knows? But I've raised kids who, I have no idea how they vote, but I know they vote. So I've passed that on, I've passed on as much how they need to vote in a proper faith. And my daughter when she married, married a Democrat, I checked that out. One of the things I checked on. My son, who's married, lives abroad, and I'm sure his wife doesn't know anything about Democratic politics. She knows about Japanese politics I'm sure, so.

I don't know that I have a great deal that I can tell you except that I would say that for me as an average Maine person, just part of who I am and how I look at life has been formed by my grandparents, my parents, and I would say to a large extent the Democratic Party.

AL: Now, did you run for the state legislature?

AT: No, I ran for a county office, and I have people who are telling me hurry up and retire so I can run for state house or the state senate. I keep saying, I don't think so. But you never can tell, never close doors.

AL: When, during the years that you were active did you work with the state party at all? Did you get a sense of how it was run and what role it played in state politics?

AT: As I say I worked for the state Democratic Party, let's see, Bob Phrates and Dave Bustin and Paul Chretien, and, boy, Vi Pease, quite a long time back. And at the time they had that beautiful little building over on State Street and I certainly understood how it ran on a shoestring and worked hard. Because at the time I was a single mom and I had no money, so I gave a lot of energy. Now I confess I give money instead. But when the Democratic, state Democratic Party calls up, I always send them something because I know they're always teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. Used to be involved in the platform committee and all of that, and maybe because I've become less involved over the years it seems to me that candidates don't really pay a lot of attention to what is in platform any more, or I think they take a different view. But maybe that's just because I haven't been as involved. I used to be able to track, that people were really a part of that. They believed in whatever the platform was involved with, including many years where there were lots of raucous comments about the war, transferring some of what Senator Muskie had done on a national level to make sure we got it here in the state of Maine, women's rights. They believed I was a flaming feminist, I don't know quite how that happened, but it might tell you something about the state at that time that I would have been considered such. I have a clear idea about what the state committee does and doesn't do, and it's not a level I ever became involved personally with.

AL: Well, your sense of it is sort of confirmed by what a lot of other people say that the role of the state party has changed a lot.

AT: I don't think, I mean it used to be almost a family affair kind of thing. We knew we were small, and we knew we had to stick together. One of the things that we have over is there are only thirty-seven people in the state of Maine, and we all know each other, and so that'll kind of tell you that we're dinosaurs because there's an awful lot of change and a lot of new people with new energy and different commitments. And one of the coworkers of mine didn't, granted she was raised in Michigan so that might have been part of it, but she didn't even know who Mr. Muskie was. So it just kind of set me back, and I'm beginning to sound like my parents.

AL: When Senator Muskie ran for reelections and such, you were active? Were your parents or your cousin Mary active with you as well?

AT: My parents never were active in a way that I was or my father's parents were. He worked for federal government most of his working career and just got used to being hatched. He always went to town or city caucuses wherever he was and put his voice in, never went to conventions, and always voted. I mean, if you had to drag yourself there, you went.

And so they weren't, you know, they put up signs so everybody knew which way they believed, but that was after he retired. And my cousin Mary, as I said to you earlier, hadn't been, in this way, she had grown up mostly in Vanceboro and then had gone down to Portland to school, and hadn't had as much time with my grandfather as my sister and I. And so I was politically active, and she got kind of curious about it and made some major life changes. And so when I suggested that she get involved in some political campaigns and gave her the names of some folks to connect with in Mr. Muskie's campaign, she did.

And we were laughing one time, there was a head table, what was it for? Oh, John Martin had been either twenty or twenty-five years as the speaker of the house, and she looked at this array of luminaries on the head table, and she said, "Geez, I've worked for all of them." I said, no Mary, they've all worked for you, you just didn't tell them. But, so she's done a lot of, an enormous amount of work for the Democratic Party, and I hope people in times to come will look back and do a retrospective of what all she's done to help people in the state of Maine. I'm a firm believer that she has made a great deal of difference.

AL: Were you by any chance at Senator Muskie's eightieth birthday party?

AT: Yes.

AL: Can you describe it for me? I don't have a real sense of what the party was like, who was involved, and who was there, and what sort of things did they do?

AT: Well, it started before the eightieth birthday because my memory was, my memory of what happened was Ginger Hillier, Ginger Jordan-Hillier, we were talking it last week and I've known her for thirty years now. We were thinking, oh golly, even she has grown to be middle aged too, was involved in organizing the party over there in Lewiston. And she asked my sister to, because my sister still lives in Waldo County, to get some taped conversations from folks who were Democrats and active so that they would be part of the memories of that particular time. And I can remember, I said take several tapes when you go to talk to Eben, and we

laughed a lot about that, and I think she probably did.

She and I went to a nursing home to visit with some older woman there, Dorothy Albert, who was a contemporary of my grandfather and Phyllis, and she went around and did a lot of that work in advance.

And then they had the eightieth birthday party on my dad's birthday. So we went at noon time to the luncheon festivities over in Lewiston, and we went down to my dad's and co-celebrated his birthday and cousin Mary's birthday because they were born close together in March.

It was a beautiful, beautiful, beautiful spring day, and I remember Don Nicoll most of anybody. That's who I remember. It was almost like it was his party, you know, that he put together, and he was the mainstay. I don't know whether he would say that. It was like a, for me it was like a kind of a high school reunion would be. People from all over the state that I hadn't seen in years and years and just the chance to get caught up with what was happening and to reminisce. I mean Don did go all the way.

AL: He talked?

AT: My memory is he talked quite a bit. There were some people who didn't come, and I'm trying to think now who it was that didn't come. You probably have an attendance list somewhere. But it was just, there really was this kind of almost family reunion sense to the whole thing. It was people who had been involved and connected for many, many, many years of the senator's life.

And it just, it just felt good to be there. But what people specifically said I don't remember, just the sense of how happy everybody was to be there and to celebrate and to hear that big booming voice again. He was just as tall as he had been when I saw him in '54, you know, '53, whatever it was in Brooks. It was lovely.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't talked about or asked that you feel is important to add?

AT: Only that I feel very privileged that you've asked me to come and talk mostly about my family, which is, as you can tell, a great source of pride for me. It's been, as I say, very flattering and very humbling to be asked to speak with you today, and I appreciate the opportunity, so thank you.

AL: You're welcome.

End of Interview