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## Violette, Elmer oral history interview

Don Nicoll

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## **Interview with Elmer Violette by Don Nicoll**

### *Summary Sheet and Transcript*

#### **Interviewee**

Violette, Elmer

#### **Interviewer**

Nicoll, Don

#### **Date**

October 11, 1998

#### **Place**

Van Buren, Maine

#### **ID Number**

MOH 053

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#### **Biographical Note**

Elmer H. Violette was born on February 2, 1921 in Van Buren, Maine. His father was a woodsman, and a butcher/grocer during the Depression. His mother was a schoolteacher, and raised seven children. Both parents were strong Democrats. His father served in the Maine Legislature for three terms. Mr. Violette was a Roman Catholic, and served as an altar boy as a teenager. He attended Ricker College and earned a two-year degree. In 1941, he was elected to the Maine Legislature, and was drafted soon thereafter. After discharge, he returned to Van Buren, and successfully ran again for a 1946 House term. After that, he attended Boston University School of Law, graduated in 1950, and returned to Van Buren once again to practice law. In 1964, Violette returned to Augusta as a State Senator. In 1966, he unsuccessfully ran for Senate against Margaret Chase Smith. He was also an active campaigner for Ed Muskie. In 1973, he was appointed to the Maine Superior Court by then Governor Ken Curtis. In 1981, he was appointed to the Maine Supreme Court, retiring in 1986. Elmer Violette passed away on June 18, 2000 at the age of 79 as a result of an automobile accident.

#### **Scope and Content Note**

Interview includes discussions of: Violette family history; Van Buren, Maine history; unions; Catholicism; Maine House of Representatives in 1946; Muskie in the Maine State Legislature;

and St. John Valley, 1919-1948.

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## **Transcript**

**Don Nicoll:** This is Sunday, October 11, 1998. We are at the home of Elmer and Marcella Violette at 42 Violette Street in Van Buren, Maine. This is Don Nicoll and I am interviewing Elmer Violette. Elmer, would you state your full name and the date and place of your birth?

**Elmer Violette:** Well, my name is Elmer Hector Violette, and I was born in Van Buren, February 2, 1921.

**DN:** Elmer, could you give us a brief overview of your life, a brief biography?

**EV:** Starting from where, when?

**DN:** Starting from when you were born; who were your parents?

**EV:** Well, I was born here in Van Buren. My father was Vital E. Violette ...

**DN:** How do you spell his first name?

**EV:** V-I-T-A-L, and he was also a native of Van Buren. My mother was Estelle Bosse, and she was born in actually Madawaska, Maine, well, her parish was St. Agatha, but it was in the township of Madawaska.

**DN:** And your parents lived here in Van Buren all of their married life?

**EV:** Yes, yes.

**DN:** How many children did they have?

**EV:** Well they had surviving, there was one child they, one child died at birth; seven, they had seven sons and one daughter. My sister Adelaide was the eldest in the family. She was born in 1923 and following that were seven boys, and I am the oldest of the seven boys.

**DN:** Now you said she was born in 1923. That must ...

**EV:** Adelaide, my sister Adelaide, yes.

**DN:** Well she was, now, she was born after you then. You were the oldest in the family.

**EV:** Oh no, no, no, she was born in 1919.

**DN:** Nineteen nineteen, okay.

**EV:** That's right, nineteen nineteen, yes.

**DN:** So there were seven sons and one daughter. And what was your father's occupation?

**EV:** Well my father, my father was a, his occupation actually started as a woodsman. He, at quite an early age, he went to work for Great Northern Paper Company, as so many people of his era did, and he was a river driver and he was known in our neighborhood, they used to talk about my dad as a, as being one of the best drivers that they had seen in the area.

**DN:** Did you ever see him performing his river driving?

**EV:** Yes, he demonstrated that to me a couple of times. We were, we, he would, his shoes, his caulking shoes were still hung up in the attic when I was growing up, and my dad married, had the good fortune of marrying a, his formal education was quite limited, but he had the good fortune of marrying a school teacher, Estelle Bosse, and so from that she, he acquired quite a bit of an education that otherwise he probably would not have had. And so you're talking about the driver experience, so he, at an early age he had a, one of his brothers-in-law, fellow by the name of George Sirois, was married to my dad's, to one of my dad's older sisters, and he was a woods boss for Great Northern Paper Company, so at a very early age he brought my dad with him into the woods and that's where he learned the log driving skills.

**DN:** He worked as a wood cutter and also as a driver, I take it?

**EV:** Yeah, that's right. And so my having seen his, well his friends of course, my father eventually wound up as a merchant. He started with an exceedingly small scale shop as a butcher, and so eventually he expanded his business. I remember that this was located, this business was located in our house, in our residence in Van Buren, and he would be, I'm trying to get this proper sequence here, Don, ...

**DN:** Don't worry about that.

**EV:** ... so if I hesitate; so he started that small meat business, a small meat business in our home in Van Buren. Well, eventually he expanded a little bit somewhat and built a slaughter house and eventually wound up with a fairly, through the years and so forth, wound up with a fairly sizeable merchandising business.

**DN:** Was it general groceries as well as meat?

**EV:** General groceries, meats. The emphasis on meats, but eventually also wound up as a, selling other lines of merchandise such as cattle feed and, so... But getting back to his driving skills, his, of course, his friends used to come into the store and talk about, you know, things, so, and they used to say how good my father was as a driver, on logs and so...so... I've told you he was in the meat business, so throughout the season he would buy cattle from the farmers. This was during the Depression, coming up, so a lot of the business was not done in cash but in trade. So my father would advance credit to farmers and he'd, then he'd buy their cattle and by the end of the summer he'd picked up probably about, oh, fifty to seventy five heads of cattle that he pastured here and there, and of course towards the end of summer, then they'd have roundup, pick all those up and butchered them when winter came. And I remember one day, I was not very old, I might have been ten years old maybe, he had to go check those cattle on an island in the St. John River, and he had taken me with him. And I saw that he had this pair of boots on his shoulder, so when we got there anyway, to the river, he told me how to be very careful, the woods was mixed with logs and the four foot bolts, you know, pulp bolts, he said be careful you don't step on those little ones, and so, but then we got on and we started going across, and he started burling, you know, those, on those big logs and ...

**DN:** Now what is burling?

**EV:** Well, it's ...

**DN:** Rolling it?

**EV:** Rolling the logs. And his friends used to come to the store, they would talk and tell us, you know, how good he was, you know, because they'd worked with him. And he was actually very, very skilled. My dad was, he was a man about, oh, he was maybe five feet six, five feet five I guess, and very stocky and probably weighed about a hundred and seventy pounds. And he was...he was quite a guy. I remember we'd go check cattle, you know, and he'd, we'd be going, have to cross the fence, you know, and he'd put his hand on the fence post and he'd just hop right over, four foot fence, and he was, never played ball but he was quite athletic. Anyway, so,

and his friends would say how good he was. Well, he gave me an example of that that day when we went over to that, we crossed a good part of the St. John River on the boom, log boom, and he showed me how, I guess gave me a demonstration of what he could do on the, and at that time he hadn't done it for, you know, he hadn't done that for a long time, so I could see what his friends meant when they said that he was quite a driver.

**DN:** And have you walked across the logs, too?

**EV:** Oh, I did, yeah. And I had the misfortune of stepping on one of those smaller four foot bolts, you know, and it was, down I went.

**DN:** He had to fish you out?

**EV:** So he had to fish me out. I guess, getting back to what's probably very important, is that my father was really a self-made man, you know, business man, and ...

**DN:** He was a self-made man but he also came from a family with a long association with Van Buren.

**EV:** Well obviously, the, yes because the first settler in Van Buren was François Violette, and he was an Acadian who along with some others came up the St. John River, were awarded grants of land by the New Brunswick government, and François settled in Van Buren in 1789. So my father, so my family has been here since 17-, in Van Buren, since 1789.

**DN:** And originally the town was known as ...?

**EV:** The town was known as Violette Brook, as Violette Brook. And unfortunately, when the, they changed the name to Van Buren during the, I'm not entirely sure why they changed the name to Van Buren, but when I was a youth, the farmers of the, you know, the people who used to come, Van Buren was a big town then. That was a major town. Madawaska, for instance, had just started creeping and growing; at that time they hadn't even built a pulp mill in Madawaska, at the time, the days that I'm talking about. And so the, but Van Buren was a growing town and the reason for that is the, was the cutting of the timber in the upper reaches of the St. John River and the wood, the logs came down from the upper, from upper reaches of the St. John River where it had been cut during the winter, and then would come down the St. John River and, well it would go down as far as St. John, New Brunswick where a substantial part of that wood wound up at the huge lumber mills.

**DN:** At St. John.

**EV:** Yes.

**DN:** So it was floated down through this area?

**EV:** That's right, that's right. And because of a situation where there were several islands and so forth, they used to, the Van Buren area was the, you know, it was the holding place for a lot of

the lumber being cut on the St. John River.

**DN:** And this was above Grand Falls.

**EV:** Oh yes, twelve, thirteen miles, about fifteen miles above Grand Falls.

**DN:** So your father as a young man went to work in the woods, and some time in the twenties, I take it, he started the butchery, the butcher shop?

**EV:** Yes, I would say in the late twenties and, you know, 1930, '31, '32, something like that.

**DN:** Just at the beginning of the Depression.

**EV:** That's right, yeah.

**DN:** That was a brave move.

**EV:** Well, and he, they had built a pulp mill in Van Buren, this Aroostook Pulp and Paper Company; it didn't run for, I think they built that in 1926 or '27, and my father went to work at that pulp mill, and of course they had... After that pulp mill was built, of course, it created quite a bit of employment in Van Buren and so my father went to work there and they had organized, unionized the mill and my father was one of the stewards in the union. I remember his telling me, having gone to Montreal for a convention of the pulp and paper unions. And my father was a staunch Democrat. I guess my grandfather was a staunch Democrat and I guess that's where he got it, from his dad, and he got a lot of his experience at that, through that mill and union experience. Well eventually the mill, they went on strike, the union went on strike and the mill closed and it never reopened, so that, while my father was a very, very strong Democrat, he was also very anti-union. It was his, you know, Don, if you look at the picture as it has existed, it was a, you know, it just didn't go together.

**DN:** Did he blame the union for the mill closing?

**EV:** Yeah, he blamed the union for the mill closing. He felt they should not have struck, gone on strike, because he was very, very much afraid that, because the mill was not old, you know, it had just been working for, operating for a few years, and he was very, very much afraid that they would not be able to reopen it. And it never did reopen. I don't know whether or not the strike itself was the major cause for it, but he always felt that it had been one of the causes. And of course the Depression then started really hitting and I guess I would have to assume myself that, you know, that was one of the primary causes. There was not very strong financial pinning under that mill to begin with. But he always, so he, as I say, while he was a very strong Democrat, he never liked unions at all. And so he had, and he was the president of the union there.

**DN:** Was he president at the time of the strike?

**EV:** That's right, and he opposed it. But he always, he had also gained quite a reputation, you

know, among, in Van Burn among mill workers and so forth for where he stood for the working man, and he was that way, always that way.

**DN:** Now, I'm interested; he was president of the union and the union did what he didn't want them to do. Did the pressure come from the rank and file for the strike, or was this something that union leadership from elsewhere pushed?

**EV:** I don't know. I don't know, I can't, I don't have a memory of that phase of it. I would have to assume that there must have been some influence, you know, from outside also because if they were unionized, and his involvement, going to the extent of going to Montreal, you know, for a convention of unionists, you know, there must have been some action on the part of the higher strata of the union organizations.

**DN:** Sounds like a piece of history that ought to be researched. Now, you mentioned your grandfather having been a strong Democrat, too. Did you know your grandfather?

**EV:** Did I know him? Yes, in fact my grandfather Violette, Viol  tte I guess is the correct name, he's my only, the only grandparent of which I have any memory. I have no memory of my grandmother Violette, nor do I have a memory of my mother's parents.

**DN:** Now, was your grandfather also a woods worker, or was he a farmer, or ...?

**EV:** He was a small farmer, yup, he was a farmer.

**DN:** Did you have lots of aunts and uncles?

**EV:** Did I? I had lots of them, lots of them. They came from two large families, both on the male and female side, yup.

**DN:** Now did your father have you working in the butcher shop and the store?

**EV:** Well, when I, oh yes, when I was, from an early age, to give you an example, my father would, he started developing a meat market and so forth, and then he had bought a slaughter house and so he would, during the day, he would go about serving his customers on meat and so forth, and then during the, at night, he would do his butchering. So I don't know how old I was, but I couldn't have been very old, and so he would bring me with him, and of course there were no electrolyzation, no electricity, in that, where that slaughter house was, and he would bring me with him with a flood light, big flashlight, and I would light him up while he went about butchering the head of cattle.

**DN:** Slaughtering them.

**EV:** And I remember so distinctly. Of course I couldn't have been much more than, I don't know if I was ten years old probably, and I had the habit of, eventually I'd wind up flashing him in the face rather than putting the light where he was working. And he'd get a little bit impa-, considerably impatient with me after awhile. So that's how really he started this business. And



the merchants, not the merchants but the working people around, you know, eventually got to have a pretty high opinion of my dad as a, you know, as a man they could trust.

**DN:** So his business turned out well.

**EV:** Yes, yes, yup, yup. He worked hard, but it really turned out to be a, quite a, you know, pretty good sizeable business.

**DN:** Now, did he teach you a lot about the business over the years?

**EV:** Yes, he did. Yes he did. I was the oldest of the boys and so consequently he delegated more responsibility to me than he did to the younger ones, although we followed fairly closely in age, you know, just like a ladder. And, but the, yeah ...

**DN:** Did you ever get the feeling during your teenage years that he would like you to follow him in the business?

**EV:** Well, I think the, of course he had several employees. I remember one time he probably had six or seven employees working in the store, you know, in the meat section and then the other part. Then he took on like feed, the livestock feed business, and, I mean, you know, he did a lot of trading with farmers. He'd buy their oats, he'd buy their hay, he'd buy their, you know, and then, and extend them the credit, you know, during the, you know... My father would buy probably five tons of baled hay from one farmer and some more toward the others, because all these people, you see, they were all mill people. They had, I probably haven't mentioned this, but there was a very, very large sawmill in what we called Keegan, that little settlement up above the actual, it's part of Van Buren but, and it hired a lot, I mean, they employed a lot of people.

**DN:** So these were people who worked in the mill and also had small farms?

**EV:** Well, they didn't have small farms.

**DN:** They didn't?

**EV:** No, they didn't. No, they, well some farmers did, but then so they, you know, he had earned quite a reputation as a man they could trust really, and so they came and, going back to the pulp mill and so forth and the experiences there, and he, people just came in to my dad's store because that's who he was. And I remember he used to tell me, and told it so often, he said, what I want you to remember is, well... might have to step back, I guess..., is that if I am able to give you the kind of home you have and do these things for our family, you have to give thanks to the people who come to our store because if it were not, if that was not so, I would not be, Mum and I would not be able to give you what we can give you if they didn't come. So, he says, always remember and never forget that, that it is the people who came to patronize our store that has made it possible for us to do what we can do for you. And that really, Don, that is something that just, like in that, he had pushed it in with I don't what, with so much force, into me, that it's something that never left me, never left me. And, now, of course there were, as far as my continuing into the business, I guess we'll have to leave that because it was a sizeable

small town business, but it really was not the business that could have been split up amongst four or five sons, you know.

**DN:** Did one of your brothers or your sister go into the business?

**EV:** One of my brothers did, yes, eventually. Well, two actually did, they split it up in two, my dad split it up in two units and two of them continued.

**DN:** Now, during those years when you were growing up, working in your dad's store and going to school, did you develop interests other than the grocery-butcher business; did you think about career at that time?

**EV:** Well, I don't know if I thought of career itself. I don't have the memory of career as such at that time that, well, I was going to say through high school. I was a very, I was always a very good student and there was competition between my older, my sister, I only had one sister, so, in which one of us was probably the better scholar. She may well have been, but if she was, I wasn't far behind. And, but I also was interested in going on to college.

**DN:** Did Adelaide go on to college?

**EV:** Yes, she did. She was... well, we went, my father had a, when he made up his mind in something it was pretty hard to change him, but yeah, when I graduated from high school, I wanted to go to college. I went to Ricker; Ricker was a junior college in Houlton. Now, one of my teachers, in fact he was my, he was athletic coach, we played two sports in high school, basketball and baseball, and I guess I was a pretty good ball player, baseball player. I was a good basketball player, too, but I was much better at baseball. And he had gotten for me a scholarship to go to Colby in Waterville. Well, and that was a full scholarship; well, my dad did not like that. He said that he had seven boys and they were all going to go to school, and we would not go, we would go to college for two years and that was it. So I had to pass up my scholarship to Colby because of his rule.

**DN:** Were you very unhappy about that?

**EV:** I was very unhappy, I was very unhappy. I didn't know what, I guess we didn't have, at least I didn't anyways, a sense of independence, you know, well if you won't, you know, if you don't dare to do it, I'm going to do it anyway. We just didn't disobey my parents.

**DN:** Was that true of all of you? All of your brothers and sister?

**EV:** Well, the fact is that my other brothers did not have the, as much educational ambition as I did. Oh yes, they all went to careers, they all went to two years, but I must say that I don't think they got the benefit of the two years that I did because they weren't students.

**DN:** Adelaide went for two years also?

**EV:** Yeah, yeah, she did; she went to school in, she went in Bangor, Beale's Business College,

she went there for two years.

**DN:** You told us about your father's attitude on what your schooling would be after high school; what was your mother's view, or did she express it?

**EV:** If she expressed it, I'm sure my father... I never saw my father and my mother exchange a single word of argument, and that's a fact. I have to assume that they had their own private conferences. My mother was not a, she was not an outgoing person very much, but she had a very strong will. And as I got to be more mature and really became a man and so forth, I suspect that she held up her own end of it.

**DN:** She had been a school teacher. Did she stop teaching school when she married?

**EV:** After we had, she stopped teaching school after we, you know, the first two or three, first two children came, that's my recollection.

**DN:** So she took care of the family. Was she an influence in your school years in terms of your interest in school?

**EV:** Oh, yes, she was a very, very strong influence. Encouraged us and, yeah.

**DN:** But she didn't intervene when it was a question of four years versus two years for college.

**EV:** No, no, no. No. My father's, I always felt that, but, you know, he had a strong sense of justice, my father did. That's unquestioned with me. But I thought he probably was not right a hundred percent of the time, which was quite true.

**DN:** He was not thinking of the options.

**EV:** That's right. Can we have about a five minutes break?

**DN:** Yup.

*Pause*

**DN:** ... were there any particular ways in which your mother influenced you?

**EV:** Yes, my mother had graduated from the training school in Fort Kent, and, well it was only, it was a two year training school.

**DN:** The Normal School at that time.

**EV:** The Normal School. And she had graduated from there that... and she was, she had a love of learning and, for instance, a lot of books came into our home, that I remember very, very well. I remember I was in high school, she had bought an encyclopedia, I don't recall what it was, so she, and I think she had a major influence on me, and also had felt that, oh, she'd had some

musical, music education, so I studied piano for five years while I was in the grades, and that was her influence. And she was in her own quiet, my mother was not a gregarious person, she was a rather shy person, but as I moved on into life and adulthood, I came to realize that she, her influence in our home was much greater than I had ever thought of giving her credit for. It may not sound, it may sound odd, but, you know. So she was a strong influence in the sense of both educating us in just more than, you know, school subjects.

**DN:** Did she have strong political views?

**EV:** Oh, she was a strong Democrat but I don't think she talked too much about that.

**DN:** Did she talk much about social issues, that is, how one related to other people and the people who had needs?

**EV:** Oh yes, oh yes. In that respect she perhaps, she perhaps, whether she followed my dad's lot in that, as I think I've told you how he felt about those, and, no, she was a quiet, not too vocal person who in her own way I think made her weight felt. Yes.

**DN:** Was the church very important in your life growing up?

**EV:** Oh yes, oh yes. The church was unquestionably, without a doubt, you know, strong, exceedingly strong influence in the community. If you, you have to know that the population in the whole valley, and including Van Buren, was ninety-five percent Catholic, and the church built all the schools that we had in Van Buren.

**DN:** So you attended the church schools in grade school and high school? Or were they public schools?

**EV:** Not high school. It was always a public school system, the, the, well... as far as teachers, payment of teachers and things like that, those teachers were paid by the town, by the municipality. The buildings were built by the church; and we had two high schools in Van Buren, we had a girls' high school, we had a boys' high school. The boys' high school was, uh, so, we had really separate units, but the church was unquestionably in the whole valley an exceedingly strong influence.

**DN:** You attended mass every Sunday and on special days, I'm sure. Were there other activities that involved you as a young person in the church?

**EV:** Oh, yes, well, we, certainly. We had, we went to mass every morning, my family, and we had what are called altar boys. Now the boys, the altar boys, were the one that you, if you were an altar boy, you assisted the priest in saying the mass, and I was an altar boy for many years, and so were most of my brothers, I guess. And I remember that I would, and for a number of years, for maybe three or four years I was an altar boy at the sisters' convent and I would, mass was at 6:30 at the convent, so I would get up regardless of whether or not ...

*(Tape fault ... pause)*

**DN:** You were telling us, Elmer about being an altar boy.

**EV:** So I would get up and go serve mass at 6:30 ...

**DN:** This is at the convent.

**EV:** ... at the convent, and whether it was ten degrees above zero or thirty degrees below zero.

**DN:** Did the sisters and the pastor of the church have an influence on you over the years?

**EV:** Well, it's really difficult, you know, to say did they have an influence on me. I think it's impossible to say they did not have an influence on me, really.

**DN:** Did you or any of your siblings ever consider having religion as your vocation?

**EV:** Well, the fact is, yes, well, in my, well, for instance in my own family, in our own family, Marcella and I had, have had five children, four sons and one daughter, and three of those sons, when they finished school, when they finished grade school, grammar school, went to minor seminary. *Marist* fathers who administered the Van Buren parish, and three of them went to that, those minor seminaries. The oldest one, Dennis, who is now fifty one, was in seminary until, well until his, practically the end of his sophomore year in college. And then he decided it was not his vocation and he left it, completed his Masters degree at Boston College, at BC. The others went to that minor seminary but they just went each two or three years and it was not for them so out they went, came back to the high school. So it was, the church was an exceedingly strong influence.

**DN:** Part of the fabric of your life.

**EV:** That's right, that's true, yeah.

**DN:** Now in grade school and in high school, were there any teachers that were of particular importance to you?

**EV:** In high school I, one teacher in particular I think was probably the best teacher I may have ever had at whatever level even since then, and he was a Mr. Michaud, Amaranthe J. Michaud who had graduated from, who had gone to Detroit to join his brother who was working for General Motors, and he acquired a bachelors and a masters degree from the University of Detroit, which was a Jesuit school. He was an exceptional teacher.

**DN:** How would you spell his first name?

**EV:** A-M-A-R-A-N-T-H-E. Yeah, he was an exceptional teacher.

**DN:** What did he teach?

**EV:** He taught English, he taught me English and French in high school.

**DN:** By the way, had French been your primary language growing up?

**EV:** Yes, yes, French was, at home we spoke French. There was not much English spoken in the home. I would have to say that I learned my English outside of the home.

**DN:** Was French the predominant language in the community at large?

**EV:** It was, it was. You hardly ever heard anyone, I don't know, but, I don't recall hearing people speak English on the street in Van Buren. You know, during my growing up years.

**DN:** But you took both English and French formally in high school.

**EV:** Oh, yes, of course. And the sciences, you know, like chemistry. I think our school was rather weak in their, in the sciences. I think it was rather weak.

**DN:** You mentioned an athletic director earlier who liked the way you played baseball apparently, and basketball.

**EV:** Well, I was, we only had two sports; we didn't have track or, I wish they'd had track. Now, as far as, I loved sports and, but baseball I guess was my better sport. I was a good basketball player also.

**DN:** What position did you play in baseball?

**EV:** Well, I, of course they're almost contradictory positions, I played, I was a catcher and I played shortstop.

**DN:** They require very different skills.

**EV:** I had, I remember, now this is, I remember this, we had, one teacher that we had, his name was Clement Spillane, came from Massachusetts and he had, he was a hell of an athlete. He had, well he had played two or three years, he was a catcher, he played two or three years in the Eastern League and he, I remember his showing me and showing the, how to catch and how to take your position as a catcher so you could be a, you know, you'd always be in control of your position. And I remember, so, and that was in my freshman year. Well, then he thought I was such a good student in that, that he would, he had me demonstrating to the regular catchers, the guys on the, in the, you know, upper grades, how to take your position as a catcher and how not to. So that, you know, you could always, and I'll demonstrate it to you just briefly. (*Gets up to demonstrate.*) So, you have to have your position, and never have your two legs parallel to, equal to one another, and you always had this one here and, so that you could always move either way, either way. And move easily either way. So that you're always in front of the ball wherever the pitcher pitched it because you could move yourself. So anyway ...

**DN:** Is that a lesson you applied in politics and on the bench?

**EV:** Well I don't know. It could well be. But, you know, it just demonstrates to you, but, and he had me showing the upper classmen ...

**DN:** How to do it.

**EV:** ... how to do it. And of course, well, I probably was fifteen years old then, fourteen, fifteen. And I did love baseball. And I was a good hitter. I wasn't big, hell, I never weighed more than a hundred thirty five pounds, you know, but I could hit.

**DN:** Were you a long ball hitter?

**EV:** No, I wasn't big enough to be a long ball hitter. But I could hit a lot of doubles. And I could hit it to either field.

**DN:** Now, was Mr. Spillane the one who had lined up the scholarship at Colby?

**EV:** No, no, the one who did that was Smiling Jim, Smiling Jim Crowley. He was a good teacher, too, he was an excellent teacher.

**DN:** Now you went from Van Buren High School to Ricker College. And that was, when, 1939?

**EV:** Yup, yes, that was a two year college, it's a junior college.

**DN:** And when you went to Ricker, did you have further studies in mind or even, in spite of your father's feeling that you go for two years?

**EV:** I don't know that I had, I don't know. But I can say today that I had, you know, I think if I were to give an honest answer, I would think I probably at that time thought, well, that'll be it for me, you know, for. I haven't mentioned also that my father was in the legislature for three terms.

**DN:** Oh, he was?

**EV:** Yes, he was in the legislature in 1937, 1939 and I think 1941 also.

**DN:** So he ran in the campaigns of '36, '38 and '40?

**EV:** Yeah.

**DN:** And, but were you very conscious of what he was doing in the legislature?

**EV:** Well, to some extent I was because he, at various times he would bring me with him, you know, and I'd spend a few days with him in Augusta.

**DN:** What do you recall about those visits to Augusta?

**EV:** Well, I remember things like going in to meet the governor and things of that nature. But it did, you know, it did, it probably might have ignited a spark to do it.

**DN:** Were you involved in his campaigns at all?

**EV:** Well, my father did not have very many campaigns, because I don't, you know, he was chairman of the Van Buren Democratic Committee, and while there had been, at one time Van Buren might have possibly, you might have possibly called it, you know, fairly even in political enrollments, by the time that I came around and my father went to the legislature, Roosevelt had been president and there was no great Republican strength in Van Buren.

**DN:** Were your father and mother enthusiastic Roosevelt supporters?

**EV:** Well, the fact is that my father was a very strong Roosevelt supporter, but my father did not vote for Roosevelt in his last two elections ...

**DN:** Ah, '40 and '44.

**EV:** ... and that's because he felt that it was not proper and it was not good for the country to have a president remain in office for more than two terms. He says we don't want a dictatorship. And that was a fact.

**DN:** And your father was a person with strong views.

**EV:** Yeah, yeah, yeah you'd have to say he was a person with strong views. But, no, he didn't vote Republican though, I assure you. But he didn't vote for Roosevelt. And I think it probably might have been a very good, you know, as I look at it, that was not a, I think that was a very, very well based decision. A soundly based decision.

**DN:** Do you know either directly from your own hearing from your father or reading at that time what issues were of most importance to him in the legislature?

**EV:** You know, Don, I guess I don't have, I don't know that I can answer anything to that. That's just, you know, it's, you know, Democrats in the legislature, when my father went to the legislature, it might have been about fifteen to twenty Democratic representatives. They just tolerated you, that's all. I say they, the Republicans did.

**DN:** Oh, my. So you went to Ricker and at the time you were at Ricker your father was in the legislature, and did you have a major at Ricker, in that two year program?

**EV:** Yeah, my major was History and English.

**DN:** History and English. And were there any teachers there that you found particularly impressive or had an influence?



**EV:** I had a very good teacher in languages, Harold Enman. And, I don't know, I just can't seem to-.

**DN:** Well now, when you ...

**EV:** Maybe we might go off the record.

*Pause*

**DN:** You graduated from Ricker in 1941?

**EV:** Yes.

**DN:** And that would have been in the spring of '41. What happened then?

**EV:** Well, I went back to Van Buren and worked in my father's business.

**DN:** And you were there until the war broke out?

**EV:** Until 1942, when I was drafted and went into the service in August of 1942. The fact is that I was, I ran for the legislature in 1942.

**DN:** Oh, you did?

**EV:** Yes, and I was elected, had no opposition. And I remember receiving a telegram, I was on KP at Miami Beach. In WWII the Air Force, I was, when I went into the service, you go through a whole battery of questions in it, you know, where would you like to serve, what would you like to do. Anyway, I wound up in the Air Force and, of course you did three months of basic training, so I wound up doing my basic training in Miami Beach. The Air Force had taken over all of the waterfront hotels for the length of about forty streets and so I got a telegram from Van Buren, I assumed my father or somebody must have sent it to me, congratulating me on my election to the legislature.

**DN:** What did they do, since you obviously ...?

**EV:** Oh, I resigned, you know, forthwith, without delay resigned my seat.

**DN:** So you had your basic training in Miami, and then what happened to you in the service?

**EV:** Well, I went to weather school, which is a weather observer school in Illinois, Chanute Field, Illinois, and that was a four month course. And I became a weather observer. Then I was shipped back to Maine, actually, and assigned to Dow Field in Bangor, and from there I went to Goose Bay, Labrador where I was stationed for the, effectively the last two years of my service.

**DN:** So you were in the service from '42 to '45?

**EV:** To, yeah, to December of 1945, yeah.

**DN:** And the Goose Bay station was important for transatlantic flights?

**EV:** It was very, very, it was one of those, you know, the, that was the height of the action, you know, in the, well, not necessarily the height but at any rate, it was part of... Goose Bay was a base built by the Canadian government and it was a base, it was called part of the air transport command region, which had the duty of sending the planes from the United States over to England. And that was Goose Bay's mission, to take a part in that. And they were basically, because planes didn't have the range at that time of flight that obviously they now do, or that they became, before the end of WWII actually had acquired the range of flight. So they, like if you were going to be sending a plane from the United States through the northern grid to England, you know, you had to, it went from let's say Bangor, Maine or Presque Isle, Maine to Goose Bay, Labrador, from Goose Bay, Labrador to Greenland, from Greenland to Iceland, from Iceland to Scotland. That was what they called the great circle route, and that involved a lot of planes, and it lost a lot of planes, too, in making those, that great circle route, because the planes didn't have the icing, the de-icing capabilities that they eventually had after a few years. So we lost a lot of planes just getting them over there. And it, and of course the pilots themselves were very inexperienced.

**DN:** Did you learn any great lessons from your time in the service?

**EV:** Well, I don't know that I can say I did.

**DN:** It was pretty routine duty from your point of view?

**EV:** Yeah, very routine really. I must say that I didn't, that I did not, you know, to some extent I rather enjoyed the time that I spent in Goose Bay. We had, the Canadians had that big force there, the Canadian Army, Canadian Air Force, the company that built the base, and our own facilities, American facilities, were not that great, but the Canadians did so we played a lot of hockey.

**DN:** Had you played hockey before you were in the service?

**EV:** I had played hockey very informally. But by the time I left Goose Bay, I, winters were long, you know, I could handle myself pretty well. But they had guys there at Goose Bay who had, there was one of them was, I can't think of his name, he'd been one of the Toronto Maple Leaf's star player.

**DN:** Oh, so a National Hockey League player.

**EV:** Yeah, he was. There were two or three National Hockey, former hockey, National Hockey League players. But they'd, you know, they'd gone by the age, but I think there was some way that by going into that, doing what they were doing, I think they were able to avoid getting drafted, going into the services.

**DN:** Much safer duty.

**EV:** But they had damn good food, than we had. What they served us as food there was not the greatest.

**DN:** Now when you were discharged in 1946, when in '46?

**EV:** December of 1945.

**DN:** Oh, December of '45. You came back to Van Buren, and then what did you do?

**EV:** Well, I ran for the legislature.

**DN:** Decided to pick up where you left off.

**EV:** That's right, yeah. But, yeah, that's a fact, that's a fact. So I ran, that was in 1946 the year I ran, that's the year that I first ran, well, no, I'd run before the war, before I went into the service, and then when I came back, and this is something, a little bit of interest that does show how things work and how people were at a particular time. When I resigned my seat, the Democrats in Van Buren who, Van Buren at that point was probably seventy percent Democratic, couldn't find a candidate to replace me. So my, I, my father, who was chairman of the Democratic Committee, went to see this friend of his, this Sirois, Wilfred Sirois who had a Chevrolet car agency, and my father had a lot of respect for him, he was a fine, exceptionally fine man. My father asked him if he would think of going to the legislature to replace me. Well, he says, I'm not a Democrat. My father says, that's not the question. We've talked about it and we think you'd be a good man to go to the legislature. Well, he says, that's a real honor. And so he went. And he was representative in the legislature for Van Buren until I got out of the service. When I got out of the service, he came to see my dad and he said, you know, do you think Elmer would like to go back to the legislature now that he's out of the service? Well, Dad said, I don't know. Well, he says, if he wants to go back, he says, I will not run again and he can replace me. And that's what happened. So, isn't that something now, huh? You wouldn't see that being done today.

**DN:** Not likely.

**EV:** No, I know it, no, no, no. So that's how people were at a particular time.

**DN:** Was Mr. Sirois an enrolled Republican?

**EV:** Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes, he was an enrolled Republican, certainly. So I, when I came back, so I told Dad, you know, Dad asked me if I was interested in going back to the legislature, and I said, well, so anyway I went back to the legislature, and that's the year that Ed Muskie also first ran.

**DN:** Do you remember when you first met Ed?

**EV:** I have no immediate impression, well that's the first time I saw Ed Muskie really. No, I can't say that. But at some point or other as we got to the legislature, obviously, you know we got, but it didn't take me very, very long, you know, to form an opinion that that was somebody special.

**DN:** What was it about him then that marked him as special?

**EV:** Well, I was, you know, I was no child by that time, and there weren't very, very many of us who had been elected in 1946 to the Maine legislature. I think we were twenty one or twenty two.

**DN:** Was that House and Senate, or just House?

**EV:** No, it's just the House.

**DN:** Just the House.

**EV:** And I do think that the Democrats had three senators, all of whom came from Androscoggin County. And, but you know, it didn't take too long to, you know, go through, you have caucuses and after awhile, well, guys start rising up in the house, you know, expressing themselves and I, there was no question who was going to be our leader, the Democratic leader in the Maine house.

**DN:** Was Ed elected leader that first year? That '47?

**EV:** No, no, no, I'm talking about our own caucus.

**DN:** Who was the leader in your own caucus?

**EV:** In the House?

**DN:** Yeah.

**EV:** Ed was.

**DN:** Ed.

**EV:** Yeah, we had our caucus, you know, and elected him as our leader, yeah. So he was, he stood out, there's no question about it.

**DN:** And do you remember what his, what impressed you most at that time?

**EV:** Well, he knew the issues, and how articulate he was in expressing them.

**DN:** What committees did you serve on in those days?

**EV:** I served on the welfare committee, and I think we had one or two bills referred to our committee; we were kept very busy.

**DN:** I'm sure. You had a small delegation - was it a pretty harmonious delegation or were there splits?

**EV:** I'd say it was harmonious, yes. Lucia Cormier was a first termmer there, among some others.

**DN:** Was Rene Cyr still in the legislature then?

**EV:** I don't remember whether Rene was. Rene was in the Maine legislature for many, many terms. Whether he was at that time, I don't know. I knew there had been, when my dad was in the legislature anyway, there had been a fellow by the name Babbins, came from Frenchville, had been in the legislature from the valley. Oh, I think Claude Martin may well have been, from Eagle Lake.

**DN:** How did the Republicans treat you?

**EV:** Well, they, I guess the best word I could say is that they tolerated us. That's the best treatment that I can express, the best term that I can express, tolerated us.

**DN:** Did you, now you were elected in '46 and served that term. Did you run again in '48?

**EV:** No, I didn't run again in '48. What had happened is that, of course I'd had that term, '46, '47, and I had also decided that my thinking of going into my father's business as I had, might have liked to, was an impossibility because you couldn't split that business into six parts. And I had acquired, having been in the legislature and having had at least the exposure of one term, somewhat of a taste for it and had started thinking about whether I might like to, you know, do a law school. So Marcella and I were married in 1946 and we started talking about it and we decided that I should go to law school, and that's what happened. At that time, of course, by that time we had one child, it was kind of tough.

**DN:** Yes, Dennis was born in '47 ...

**EV:** Yes, that's right.

**DN:** ... and where did you go to law school?

**EV:** BU, yeah.

**DN:** Were you at BU at the same time Floyd Harding was there? Or did he come, yes, you would have been; he graduated, he said, in '49.

**EV:** Yeah, he was, yes, he graduated in '49 so he would have graduated a year before I did, I

graduated in 1950. There was quite a delegation from the state of Maine at BU.

**DN:** Was Dick Dubord there?

**EV:** I don't think Dick Dubord, Dick Dubord was in the legislature.

**DN:** No, but was he at law school with you?

**EV:** Oh, I don't recall, I don't recall. He was a, we were divided into sections and divisions, although I must say that I had to have known Dick Dubord at that time, no doubt about that. But when he went to law school, I don't recall, I don't know.

**DN:** Now, did Marce stay in Van Buren?

**EV:** Well, we decided that there was only one possibility for me to go to law school. She would stay in Van Buren, continue to teach school, she was teaching school at the high school, boys' high school at that time, she was the only woman there with eight priests on the faculty...

**DN:** I suspect she ran circles around all of them.

**EV:** And she, yeah, because she'd had her master's degree by that time, from BU at that. And so we, so I went to, she stayed home, taught school, and I went to BU.

**DN:** Who took care of Dennis?

**EV:** Oh, she had a maid.

**DN:** She had a maid to do that. Now, tell us about Marcella, was she from Van Buren?

**EV:** Oh, Marcella, I'll tell you something about Marcella, and this is going to be off the track. No, it won't go off the track, but I heard a very fascinating interview a year or two ago and someone was interviewing former governor Cuomo of New York, and they're getting into closer personal things and so the interviewer asked him a question about his wife, and he said, well I'll tell you, I have done a few wise things in my lifetime and one of the wisest that I ever did was to select a bride who was above me. And he said, I think that that had a great influence on my career. So I've said that to myself, well, there's another guy who did the same thing, because Marcella was quite something. Anyway, she graduated from the col-, she was from Van Buren ...

**DN:** What was her maiden name?

**EV:** Belanger. And she went to the College of New Rochelle, which is an Ursuline womens' college in New Rochelle, New York, and then taught for one year at Stearns, no, at, taught for one year at this little town up in, and then went back and then got a fellowship and went to BU for her masters. So ...

**DN:** Now didn't she do some graduate work in Canada as well?

**EV:** No, she, and then, during the time that I was in Boston also, she started doing some work on a doctorate degree and that she completed in 1950, and she was, it was, there was a college in Edmundston ...

*End of Side Two, Tape One  
Side One, Tape Two*

**EV:** ... and she started taking courses there, and then they tied that in with LaValle University in Quebec, and she was awarded her doctorate, written completely in French, her dissertation, and so ...

**DN:** And her dissertation was on what subject?

**EV:** Her dissertation was on the history of the Americans on the St. John Valley, of the people on the American side of the St. John Valley.

**DN:** So she was a historical scholar, was, is.

**EV:** Yes, yeah, was, is.

**DN:** Had you known each other as children?

**EV:** Oh yes, we were in the grades together, from the third grade on through the eighth grade.

**DN:** Was this an early romance, or one that bloomed after you graduated from high school?

**EV:** Well, we didn't go to high school together, though, because we had a girls' high school and a boys' high school. And I didn't, you know, I didn't go out with girls, so to speak. Not that I had anything against it; I was just too busy doing other things. But for whatever reason, Don, there was a spark that was going at a very, I would think as I look back in retrospect, at quite an early age. And the spark found fruition.

**DN:** In many ways.

**EV:** Just the right person.

**DN:** Well that's a good place to end the first of our interviews. Thank you very much.

**EV:** We haven't talked about Ed.

**DN:** Just briefly.

*End of Interview*

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