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Whitcomb, Roy, Jr. oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

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Interview with Roy Whitcomb, Jr. by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Whitcomb, Roy, Jr.

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

March 6, 2000

Place

Farmingdale, Maine

ID Number

MOH 172

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Biographical Note

Roy Whitcomb, Jr. was born on December 26, 1927 in Cleveland, Ohio. His parents met at Deering High School in Portland, Maine. His father, Roy Sr., served in World War I, and later worked for Goodyear Tire and Rubber in Akron, Ohio and Hally Brothers in Cleveland, Ohio. His mother, Mary Ashton (Rustemeyer) Whitcomb worked for General Electric in Schenectady, New York. Both returned to Maine during the Depression. Roy, Jr. earned his degree in Journalism from Boston University in 1950. He became a police reporter in Fredericksburg, Virginia, then was drafted for two years during the Korean War. He worked for Jim Oliver, and then helped Curtis run for the House in 1964. He was Deputy Secretary of State under Governor Curtis for one day. He served as Director of Democratic Party in New Hampshire, 1965. He was Executive Assistant and Press Secretary under Ken Curtis, during his second term as Governor. He served as the Director for Model Cities in Maine.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: 1954 Maine gubernatorial campaign 1969-1972 Presidential campaign; environmental protection; Republican party in Maine; Democratic party in Maine; Model Cities; George Cleave, founder of the city of Portland; 1964: Democrats gaining the majority in Maine legislature for the first time in 50 years; New Hampshire Democratic state

committee with ten counties and ten representatives from each county; recollections of the Robert F. Kennedy assassination; flag burning, confederate flag in South Carolina; Dick McMahon, head of Federal Housing Authority, Maine; Brennan vs. Curtis; George Mitchell; and Jane Kilroy.

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Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is a second interview with Mr. Roy Whitcomb at his office at the
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Roy Whitcomb: Maine Association of Retirees.

AL: At 172 Main Street in Farmingdale. The date is March 6, the year 2000, this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. I'd like to start sort of following-up on a couple things that Brian talked to you about at the last interview. One thing I didn't see in the interview was what was your father's first name?

RW: My father's?

AL: Your father's first name.

RW: Same as mine, Roy

AL: Oh, Roy, okay.

RW: That's why they call me junior, okay?

AL: Okay, and was your father's family from Maine, way, way back?

RW: Oh yes, oh yes, yes.

AL: Do you know how far back?

RW: Well my, I have some paperwork that will show you direct descendancy of George Cleave, one of the founders of the city of Portland. So yeah, I would say there was straight lineage that goes right back to the first settlers of Portland. And my grandmother, his mother, and my grandfather were, you know, of different obviously families, but I believe my grandmother's family was more of a Portland early, early, early resident because her middle name was Brackett, and Brackett's a prominent Portland name. And Trefethen is another one, and I think she was also, you know, named like, oh dear, Minnie Brackett Trefethen, something like that. I don't really have those papers with me. But anyhow that's, I would say that's true. And well, what -

AL: They're both Yankees.

RW: Yeah, yes they are, yes they were. What else do you want to know about them?

AL: You said that they were Republican, which -

RW: Well, they were Republicans, and I'll tell you why. My father, during the '20s, worked and lived in Ohio. And now in the end of the '20s the Depression hit the country and hit the big cities first. My father worked for a large department store, and they finally put him on commission only salary in a department of selling Oriental rugs, and nobody was buying anything like that. So he really, in effect, was out of work. He wasn't out of work, but he decided he might as well be because he was not getting paid. Now, he came back to Portland, and he and his father bought a coal company, John C. Chisholm Coal Company. And during the '30s we had a coal and oil business, mostly of coal, and wood. And during that same period of course everybody's, you know, going broke, and many, many people are going through bankruptcy, and many, many people are leaving my father high and dry. He lost all his money because all his customers just left him with, you know, with not paying their bills.

And by the end of the '30s, the beginning of WWII, he sold, he had to sell his business to a wholesaler to pay off his debt to them, and then he went to work for the wholesaler. But then he went to work for the shipyard in Portland because it was a big, it was wartime. But I mean, during that period Roosevelt was president, they were writing a lot of laws to help the poor people. Among them were the bankruptcy laws, you know. And forgiveness, well, it's all right to say that, and it's good to forgive people, but what about my father? I mean he was left out of that formula and really blamed it all on the Democrats. He blamed it on Roosevelt's New Deal and all those things. And of course I'm a child, all I know is what I hear at the dinner table.

AL: What kind, did they talk about Roosevelt and politics a lot?

RW: No, they really didn't, no, they really didn't because it was, I was much too young to understand it, that's really what it amounts to. But they felt they were, it was too bad that the Democrats are ruining everything that my father thought was worthwhile, you know. But, I mean, that's not, I can't dwell on that, I don't feel that way myself.

AL: Were they politically active?

RW: No, no, no, no, no. No, they were just there and they were part of the mix. And the small businesses were being swallowed up by the big businesses. And then we, then, I mean, I guess later on, you know, I don't know, but I think it's always true, children sort of take an independent point from their parents, and they want to do just about the opposite of what the parents do. So when I had an opportunity, you know, and I'm now old enough to vote and all that type of thing, I paid more attention to the Democrats because I just thought, I liked their campaigns and their point of view and so forth. And I began to meet a lot of friends, meet a lot of people I knew and they were Democrats, so we were all kind of, it was a social affair as well as a political affair somewhat, wouldn't you say.

AL: What do you think are the people or- what were some of the influences on you as you were growing up that shaped your attitudes and beliefs politically? Do you have any sort of recollections of what those might be? People, or teachers that touched you, or events?

RW: Well I suppose you could say there were some teachers. I went to Deering High School

and we had a good man named Mitchell.

AL: How do you spell that?

RW: It was Mitchell. I'm pretty sure it was Mitchell. Anyhow, he was a freshman history teacher and he was an old timer, and he had been around a while. When WWII came, of course he's a tea-, he's not going to go in the service. He's too old. But he taught us ancient history and then related it to modern history and to what's happening like today, which was back in 1941. Then I went to high school the year the war started. And I suppose you might say they influenced me. I had another teacher named John Cotrell, and Mr. Cotrell was a, oh, probably a junior or senior history teacher; he was also a football coach. And later on I ran into him, he was a member of the Maine legislature, but that's when I was a member of the governor's staff, see, so we had a different relationship then.

But I can't think of anybody who, I can't believe anybody who influenced me to make me want to be a Democrat. I wanted to be a Democrat because I didn't, I guess if you want to be, as much as I can think fair about it, I think the government has a responsibility to people, and they cause people to be in certain circumstances. They caused my father to lose his business, they caused WWII and therefore millions of people are, you know, under arms, and big shipyards and all other defense plants were built, and the government was doing that. And so it behooves you to make sure the government's doing the right thing, you know, by your standards. And my standards were that if you do something you've got to be responsible for it, you can't walk away from it. And I think, I thought many Republicans were not on that, did not accept that philosophy. They really thought, we got to get rid of government, or we got to do this, you're now, and that to, not to hurt people, but to make them more independent. But they absolutely don't realize that government makes people so dependent that you can't just pull the legs out from under them tomorrow and say, "We're doing you a favor, and we're helping you become independent." I believe the government has a responsibility that it has to fulfill. I think that the Democrats recognize that more than the Republicans.

And I think they do this for the reason that if you want to look at the philosophy of things, I think the Democrats believe in the individual and the Republicans believe in the organization, you know. And the organization might be twenty people or a million people or anything in between, but the Democrats don't, they think of one person, at a time and they try to, I suppose, win their vote, to win their favor, and do what they think they should, that should be done for people. I don't think that, I think that that's the hallmark of the Democratic Party, that it's a people, that it's an organization of people who want to do the right thing for people. Whereas I think the Republican Party wants, I think the Republican believes what, they used to talk about with, the man who was the head of General Motors at one time. He said that he thought that the, if you gave General Motors lots of money, enough so they build cars and tanks and whatever they did, that would be good for the country because the company would spend its money and the money would trickle down to everybody, see. And I guess that's called the trickle down theory, and it's not true that it does, that it trickles down to everybody. It trickles down to the next level of your guys, who are also Republicans.

Which reminds me of a story, but it's about Walter Reuther, and I don't know if you know

Walter Reuther? But he used to be the president of the CIO-AFL- auto worker's union, United Auto Workers, and in a spee-, and they were talking about this guy who, (by the way his name was [Charles Erwin] Wilson), who's the head of General Motors, and Wilson's theory, the trickle down theory, he said, "If you can't," in a speech he said, "If you can't understand it, let me put it this way. A trickle down theory is like this, if you feed a horse well, it'll leave something for the birds." And he said, "That's what they're doing." But anyhow, the, I can't go on with these stories, my mind is not geared to doing that, except I do remember that one. What else do we want to talk about?

AL: When did you first meet Ken Curtis?

RW: Well, I first met Ken Curtis, he was working for a congressman named James Oliver, and his job was to, oh, bring the newspaper people, or the news people, up to date on what Jim Oliver was doing. And I was a newspaperman, and they, he used to come around to me and promote Jim Oliver, so I got to know him more or less that way, as a starter. I was working in York County at the time. Well, Jim Oliver decided to run for congress, so he'd show up at picnics and outings and so forth, and I would show up at those things and cover them as a news event. And that's when I met Curtis, then. Later on, Oliver became elected, got elected, and Curtis went to work for him, and I later moved to Portland and worked in the Portland office of the *Portland Press Herald*. And now Curtis is coming over there to bring news releases from Jim Oliver's office to me, or to whoever was going to take them in that day, me once in a while.

And then one night I'm out shopping with my wife at one of the local supermarkets like Bradlee's, it's out in the Westbrook-Portland line, and I ran into Curtis, and his wife, and their two children; they were out shopping. And he said to me, "You know," after we bumped into each other, "You know," he says, "I'm thinking of running for the congress. Would you be interested in maybe helping me, or at least sitting down and talk with some others about my chances of winning an election like that?" Well I knew something about politics, and I guess I would, you know, know as much as a lot of people. I said, "Yes, I would, I'd be glad to do that." And so, he lived out near me in Cape Elizabeth at the time, and, I think he did, anyhow, we set up a Sunday meeting. When I got out there, there were about twenty people out there, he had talked to quite a few people, and the idea was, he's already decided he's going to run for congress, he is a Democrat, and he's got to win a primary. And I don't remember if there was somebody running against him or not.

AL: Is this for the, excuse me, the Senate or the House?

RW: The House of Representatives, this was 1964, this was a very good year for the Democrats because Lyndon Johnson was running for reelection and Barry Goldwater was running against him. So anyhow, I met Curtis then and we all agreed, I'm a reporter, I can't really be a paid employee of his unless I quit my job, and nobody's going to quit their job and do this, they just volunteer. Well, some of them were teachers and salesmen and things like that; that's easy for them to spend an evening or something, but as a reporter, you've got to cover everything a candidate does, and if you're working for him or in his behalf, you're perhaps suspect that you'll probably only see the good in him and the evil in somebody else. So I had to remind him of that, but I agreed to work for him anyhow, I said, "I just won't be, you just can't

rely on me to ignore something that, if it happens to be bad, that occurs, if I know about it.” And so they accepted that, and, but I wasn’t really what you might call a spy in the camp. I mean, I didn’t go back to the editor and say, “By the way, I’ve got this great chance to spy on this candidate.”

But anyhow, what we did is we met on Sundays at a little shop up over a shoe repair shop up in Portland, right on Congress Street. And we set up like the Curtis for Congress headquarters. And we, Sundays we’d meet and more or less plan what he was going to do for the week. Others were out there finding dates for him to speak and all that stuff, and then I would write up a set of news releases to cover these events and he would take them with him. He didn’t, I didn’t deliver them, he’d deliver them, and, or his secretary did, I don’t know. But anyhow, I did that. And then he wound up, he won the primary.

I think, I do not think he was opposed but whether he was or not, the election, he was running against a man named Stanley R. Tupper, who’s, who lives down at Boothbay Harbor even as we speak. And, Stanley R. Tupper, you know, Curtis had these two little girls, they were probably six and seven or eight years old at the time, and they could say together, in unison, “We hate Stanley R. Tupper,” you know, it was really funny they could do it so well. But anyhow, they, well they used to do that every time we had a meeting or something. But they were just, they were funny. But they, we worked, you know, quite a bit trying to get him elected. He winds up a couple of hundred votes short, two hundred or something. Well that’s cause for a recount, so they had to recount every vote, and then that went on for weeks. It was the middle of December, I think, before they finally determined that Curtis had lost the election by about two hundred and four votes or a hundred and ninety, something around there, almost exactly what they said.

AL: So ‘64 he loses, and then in ‘66 he runs for governor?

RW: That’s right. So for two years, well see right away, Democrats won everything else, you know, they managed to take over the legis- Maine legislature, something they hadn’t done, I think, in fifty years. They went to, and one of the things they had as a spoils of war mentality, they were able to name the state treasurer, the state auditor, the secretary of state, the attorney general, and one other person whom I can’t remember. But anyhow, so they named Curtis secretary of state, so he got a job.

Well, he’s a good fellow and we work together pretty well, he called me up and wanted to know if I wanted to be a deputy secretary of state. And I thought about it a couple of seconds. I said, “Yeah, I’d like to do that. What are my responsibilities?” “Oh,” he said, “You’ll probably be in charge of the motor vehicle division, you know.” Well I can’t imagine me doing that, to be honest with you, but I figured, well, they change parties and you change administrations, these things happen. So I did that. [Aside: You want to shut that door? It’ll stop this beeping noise] Anyhow, so I took this job, I mean I agreed to take this job, and a friend of his named Lenny Ross was the deputy secretary of state for administration, and that was like the, well, the rest of the story I guess, election division and things like that. And I, now they’re going to have to meet the governor in council before they could, before Curtis was, oh yeah, no, he was the secretary of state. They swore him in. Now, the governor and council have to name the deputies to the secretary of state, but at the recommendation of the secretary of state, and since they’re all

Democrats on the council, but the governor is still there, I mean the governor, who was a Republican named John Reed, but they all voted, you know, to hire Lenny Ross as a deputy, and they voted not to hire me at all. And it was because it was, well, nobody ever gave you a good reason, they sort of put it off, tabled it, what they call it. And I heard later that there were two members of the governor's council, Jim Reed, not Jim, anyhow, Reed, Bud Reed, Buddy Reed.

AL: Oh, Carlton.

RW: Carlton Reed from Day's Ferry, and Dana Childs, they were, Dana was the Speaker of the House and Reed was the President of the Senate, and both those guys wanted to be governor. And now they felt that Curtis wanted to be governor, and so they didn't want to give him any free help by hiring his aides to work in his office, you know. And so I didn't get the job, and you know, just forget it. But Curtis won anyhow. In two years he traveled the state of Maine -

AL: Didn't he use his position as secretary of state to be very visible?

RW: That's right. He would travel to various towns and cities with the highway safety projects in mind because remember the secretary of state also licenses automobiles. I mean, highway safety is a great concern, and so he did that. Anyhow, he also, anytime he went to one of these towns, he found a few Democrats and asked them, reminded them, "I may be running for governor, I hope if I do I can count on your support." And they said, "Sure, nobody else has asked us to do anything." Well of course not, he's two years ahead of them, you know, for two years he had this opportunity.

So when the time came for the primary, Reed and Childs and Curtis were all on the ballot. I better be right about that. They may not have all been on the ballot, but they were all considering the job, and they'd go to towns and cities where they said, "I'm already pledged to Curtis." That's really what happened. Now, how, whether, I'm not sure that they all went on the, I think Reed did but Dana didn't. Well, maybe they all did, I'm- we'd have to look at that . . .

AL: I can check that.

RW: Check that out, yeah. But anyhow, they lost of course, and Curtis won in the primary and then the election he ran against a guy named, who was the attorney general, named Erwin [1967-1971].

AL: James Erwin?

RW: James Erwin, yeah. And he had a tight race with him, too. They almost had another recount. And then four years later he had a recount because Erwin ran again, you know, (*unintelligible phrase*), and we had to count every vote in the state of Maine twice, you know, because that was that close. Yeah, well anyhow, but that wasn't my, I wasn't involved in that.

AL: You didn't work on that campaign at all, for governor?

RW: No, I worked, no, when I, no, when I left, when there was this secretary of state thing came up and then died, I got involved with some friends of Curtis' who were the Dunfey family, D-U-N-F-E-Y, and Bob Dunfey, who lives in Maine and was active as hell in Curtis' campaign, had a brother named Bill, who was very active in New Hampshire Democratic Party. And Bill became chairman of the Democratic Party there and he wanted to hire somebody to kind of be a direc--, executive director, who didn't have any, you know, didn't have any

AL: Prejudices, or?

RW: Who didn't know anybody in New Hampshire is what it amounts to. If you don't know anybody there you can't get involved with them. And that was me. I didn't know a soul in New Hampshire except Bill Dunfey, and so they were able to find that I was independent of everybody, which I had to be because I didn't know them. And apparently there'd been a lot of infighting previous to that by little factions that had their own followers and so forth. And anyhow, I, that's a much different structure down there, by the way. There were ten counties, and each county has ten members of the state committee, so when they all meet that's a hundred people, you know. Now, to get those people, get fifty-one of them to go your way on something is quite difficult, I'd say. But anyhow, Bill Dunfey was very good at that, and I had no, I never had to deal with that issue, getting people to agree with us.

But anyhow, I worked down there for two years, and during that time Curtis was doing his campaigning and running up here, and then running for governor. I wasn't up here, I was down there, and I was working on another governor's campaign, in the senate campaign and so forth, as a Democratic committee, you know, officer or whatever. I came up to Maine a couple of times just to check things out, or they asked me to come up and, have any ideas, you know, I could throw at them, things like that. That's all.

AL: But after he was elected governor, did you find a place on his staff during those eight years?

RW: Yeah, well yeah, as soon as he got elected he called me up and asked me to come up and talk to him about a job. And so I said, "Well, I've got a good job down here, you know." Oh, he says, you might like it better back in Maine. I said, "Well you're right, I would probably." But it's like, you know, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. I had a job, I'm driving back to Maine, maybe I got a job. But anyhow, I did, I got a job and I went to work for him as his press secretary, of the governor, and besides, they didn't want to call it that, they called me the executive assistant to the governor. And, but it was really dealing with press relations and so forth, and whatever else they could find because they gave me other jobs. Then I went to, I stayed on that job about, oh I'd say four years, but he got reelected and a lot of other people showed up in his staff.

And meanwhile, I'm burning out, I mean you can only do this so long. I think I'm burning out. And a job opportunity showed up on the governor's staff but in a different light, and it was the model cities director for the state.

So I became the model cities director, and I really only worked with Portland and Lewiston, see.

And what you have is, the federal government gave those, each one of those cities ten million dollars. We had a five year contract, they're going to get two million a year, and they're supposed to go and do things with that money that you couldn't get done any other way because they just cut all the red tape and so forth and so on. And in many cases it involved state laws and state government programs, and my job is to kind of guide those and get those together and that's what I did. And I had a nice job, a nice set up.

AL: You must have, did you work with John Orestis?

RW: Oh sure, yeah, yeah. He was on the model cities committee down in Lewiston, yeah.

AL: He was politically active. Did you ever, were you ever in, know him in other circles over the years, Democratic circles?

RW: Well no, really, just, well in the model cities program I may have seen him, no, I can't say that I have. I know he's involved in nursing homes now and things like that.

AL: And Henry Bourgeois?

RW: And Bourgeois, right. Well they were, you see, that was, then they had their own model cities committee in the city of Lewiston. Those two guys were quite active in it, I think Orestis as a lawyer, and he was, and they needed a legal counsel, he was the legal counsel for that committee. And Bourgeois, they had a guy working for them who was a former Army colonel or lieutenant colonel, and his name was Carbonneau, Carbonneau, Dick Carbonneau, and then he, when he left and Bourgeois took over the job. But there was a lot of, I mean I stayed out of the, there was a lot of infighting in that. They had various committees doing different things, and it was not, I just didn't think it was a good idea to get too close to any of them. My God, some of them became quite rich, others wound up in jail, you know, bribe, well they were involved in different things, some of them legal, some not, and some extra legal activities.

AL: That sort of came from the model cities?

RW: Oh yeah, well, some ideas they gained from that, well it seemed like it. I don't want to go on tape about all that.

AL: Lucien Gosselin, was he someone who you worked with?

RW: Oh yeah, he was the city clerk then.

AL: Oh, he was city clerk then, okay.

RW: What does he do now? I don't know what he's -

AL: He is head of the Lewiston-Auburn economic growth, I'm saying it a little bit wrong, but it's the economic growth council for Lewiston and Auburn.

RW: Yeah, I've seen his name in the paper once in a while. I ran into him at a retirement party for some guy about a year ago. I didn't know what he was doing.

AL: What was it like being a news secretary for the governor? You said your responsibilities were a lot of the times press releases and such?

RW: Oh well, yeah, that -

AL: What made it stressful?

RW: Well, I'll tell you, in the governor's staff there are probably five or six people who are all press secretaries in their own mind, you know. And every day some reporter would show up with a story that he got. How did he ever find that out, you know? And it's because somebody in our staff told somebody who told him, and now he's in the front door trying to get it (*unintelligible phrase*). Well, we used to spend a lot of time plugging up some of those leaks, but we never were too successful.

And we had, oh I don't know, the job required a lot of other things to do. We set up meetings, you know, that were newsworthy of themselves and I remember, because I'd worked in New Hampshire, I got a hold of the governor of New Hampshire to have him come to visit with the governor of Maine, spend the night at the Blaine House, and we'd have a party for Andrew Wyeth, who this guy in New Hampshire really thought the world of because he's an art collector in his spare time, whereas Curtis knew of Andrew Wyeth and all that stuff, but this guy was (*unintelligible word*) serious. He was a young man, he was a lawyer in the Greenwich Village in New York, and the artists paid him with paintings, they had no money, and some of those artists are famous today. But his home is full of great art.

AL: Now, whose home?

RW: John King, down in New Hampshire. So anyhow, Andrew Wyeth, we're going to have an event for him and King had to go to, we really wanted King to come here for that and we almost created it for him. But those things, you know, we did that. I'll tell you something strange about that. That night was a big turnout at the Blaine House. Then, you know, the evening wears on and it's over, everybody goes to bed. Now the governor's wife, the governor of New Hampshire and his wife are gone to bed, the governor of Maine's gone to bed. Only, he sits up and watches TV for a while because out in California they're deciding who's going to run, who's going to win the presidential primary out there. And Bobby Kennedy is running, and Christ, if he doesn't get shot and killed, you know, that night. And I mean, now all of a sudden the world drops right out from under you. I mean that was awful. And it was awful because of, for a million reasons, but I was up, I stayed overnight in Augusta and, I was there so late, I couldn't drive to Portland where I lived and come back the next morning, you know, I'd just be on the road all the time.

So anyhow, all of a sudden I, this happens, now I've got to get down to the Blaine House, I can't get in, they've locked all the doors and gone to bed, you know. And I figure they've gone to bed, so I get up at six in the morning and go down there because the news media is going to be crawling all over these two governors, and I mean not just the local guys but the, New York and

Boston and whatever, and they were. And I got down there at six o'clock and I find that you can't get in at six o'clock, but knock on the door and the cook is awake, she let me in, so I went upstairs, they were awake, they were up actually. But it was an interesting night, and even, you know, having been followed by the interesting night before type of thing.

But I was going to tell you something to segue into this conversation on total, in its totality; shooting Bobby Kennedy really killed my spirit a lot too, you know. I really was quite charged up when Jack Kennedy got elected, you know, and I thought that, you know, anything's possible and the government can do everything, and on and on and on. And I'd got involved in government much of the time thinking in those terms. Bobby Kennedy being shot just deflated my bubble quite a bit. I mean I began to look at the reality of life as more than just a dream, you know. And it's fine for guys to say, you know, "I have a dream," and so forth and so on, but the reality is that, you know, it's pretty hard to reach those dreams. And what happens about a month later, they shoot Martin Luther King.

I mean, you know, what kind of a country, where are we heading is what really scares you. And it did, it does scare you. And I mean, and I don't know whether we've successfully avoided disaster or not in that point because we still have a lot of red necks and nuts in this world. And, you can just look at yesterday's newspaper or something, or today's I suppose. So I mean I still worry about the country around me, but I don't have that feeling that we can solve it all if I just go to work tomorrow morning. You know, more people have got to do it that way. So, that was a long story, but that's a lot of what I think.

My, some day, oh God, someday I keep thinking I ought to be a minister, you know, I'd like to be a preacher because I'd like, I mean I believe in these things sometimes, and I don't always practice everything I suppose exactly the way you should, but anyhow, I admire people who do. And I just, absolutely disgusted with people who cannot do something for the rest of the, for the rest of the people. I mean if they just get their focus so narrow, they're only worried about their own little bottom, that's too bad, because they're not going to benefit by, nobody else is going to benefit from it. It's too bad. I think guys like Muskie, by the way, helped put some vision in that, you know feeling, to, (*unintelligible word*) you could see where you were going type of thing. Nice when you feel that way because you like to be able to see where you're going. Well, I digress, so maybe we ought to go back to whatever the notes are.

AL: I was just thinking, what you were speaking about, do you find that there's a change in political participation at least in Maine over the years since you became involved? Is the younger generation doing their share?

RW: Well, I think-

AL: How do you see it?

RW: I guess I probably, maybe I'm unfair, but I think the younger generation has a feeling that they want to change things, but I don't think they think that government is going to help them do it, you know. I think I felt that if you just make the government work right, it will change things. But I don't think young people today believe that you can rely on the government to help them

make these changes. Somehow or other they've got to do it themselves. And, so you see these horrible demonstrations. This idea of burning the flag as some sort of expression of concern, that's stupid, you know, I mean all you do is irritate some people. And flying the flag in the South Carolina State House is not a, that's their bars and, stars and bars thing down there, that's stupid. It's not going to change things, it's just going to, it's like fanning a fire, you know, that's already out of control, and I don't see that there's much point to that.

But that's what I think is happening, I mean, you have people more in that corner of going out there and making matters worse, but not using what you might call the tools that are available to them. Maybe they're impatient and they have to be considered in that respect, but everybody else was impatient and they got things done. So, you know, I don't, and then I realize that I'm not a twenty-year-old liberal any more, I'm older than that. I still think liberal instead of conservative, but I do, but I do, reality is a little more, has been with me a longer time, you know, and things do have to get done the right way.

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

End of Side A
Side B

AL: We are now on side B of the interview with Roy Whitcomb on March the 6th, the year 2000. And we were just talking a little bit about your position as a news reporter, and I guess the next thing to talk about is when you met Muskie. Do you remember first being- I remember from your first interview you talked a little bit about Milt Wheeler asking you, "So what do you think of Muskie?" And your response was sort of, "Well, I haven't really given it much thought." When did you sort of become aware of Muskie and who he was, and when did you first meet him, do you remember?

RW: Well I had met him at, when I was a reporter in Biddeford, York County, and he was campaigning for governor. I met him a couple of times but I didn't, you know, it was just how are you, that's it. I never have had a close relationship, or never did have, a close relationship with Ed Muskie. I mean, I was at meetings once in a while, I went to some parties where he spoke, and I'd been to some small gatherings, but I mean he's never been, I would say I would never consider him a friend of mine, and I'm sure if he were alive today he'd say the same thing. But we are aware, I'm aware of him of course.

AL: What were your initial impressions?

RW: Oh, my impression was that he's a very bright man, and quite tall, and had a way of considering an issue on every aspect of it, you know, so I don't think he ever left a subject with an unanswered corner. And I remember him being criticized when he was running for president for not being able to develop short answers, because he said that he examines everything like you would a diamond that has a thousand facets, and you have to look at every one. And I think Muskie did that all his life, and I was impressed with the idea, that you should do that. I don't think you can make snap judgments. And that impressed me about Muskie.

I was somewhat impressed with Muskie by some of the people who gathered around him who, when they weren't beside him, would be critical of him, you know, like he talks too long, or he's done this or that, which they were sort of negative, which I thought to myself, you know, you don't need friends like that because they're really not helping you. But there were some people who were good friends of his that I knew, that I knew better than I knew him. Shep Lee is a good example, the guy's a car dealer. Certainly knew Wheeler, Ed McMahon, Dick McMahon, very, wonderful fellow and a good close friend of Muskie.

AL: Did you know Dick McMahon?

RW: Yeah, I did know Dick McMahon.

AL: What kind of a person was he?

RW: Well, I don't know, he seemed to always have a good line of patter, he was humorous. I think he had a good, you know, a good easy going personality, but you know beneath all that a very sharp mind. It would be obvious if you had to call on it and that type of thing. I had an interesting circumstance occur when I was much younger and involved him. I was, I had a house, and I had a mortgage, and I missed a couple of payments on it; now the bank wants to foreclose. Well, I went to see the bank and I said, "I've only missed two payments. Why do you want to foreclose? I mean, that doesn't seem fair." Well, he said, "In Maine you know we don't start the proceeding; it takes a year to complete it and we don't want to be stuck with a house for a year if you decide not to pay for it." I said, "I would never do that." Well, da-da, da-da. Well anyhow, they irritated me quite a bit, and I decided I'm going to dump this bank, go to another bank because, I mean, I just don't think that was a very responsible way to treat a person. And I had a full time job, it wasn't that I wasn't capable of paying the mortgage.

And so I went to Dick McMahon, I just happened to see him. He at the time was the head of the Federal Housing Authority in Maine. He's the chief honcho. And I explained to him what was happening. I said, "This doesn't seem right." "Well," he said, "I don't think that's right either, I'm going to send you down to see another guy in another bank." So I went down to see another fellow in another bank, right on Congress Street, just another block down the road. And he said, "Well, Dick McMahon said you were coming down." So I explained to this guy what happened, and he said, "Well, I don't see any problem. Just bring in your paper work, and we'll transfer your mortgage from that bank to ours." And that's what they did. I paid back two or three months to, see what I did is, once I started this I put the money in a bank account so I wouldn't lose it, I didn't piss it away.

And they were, you know, they were good, very good to me in that bank, I carried the, I mean they carried me as long as I needed that bank. I later sold the house and moved to New Hampshire. But even so, Dick McMahon was my intermediary and he couldn't have been nicer, you know. And he was very helpful, and I'll never forgive him-forget him for that. And he, I guess he might have done that for other people, I don't know. But I don't think he did it as a political favor in that I wasn't going to return anything to him for it or anything like that. But we were acquainted, and that's his job. And my, and I, I was quite impressed with him anyhow for a number, that's one of the reasons. You ought to read that book called Muskie by Don Hansen.

AL: Yes, I have.

RW: Yeah, well one time they're talking about McMahon and Muskie are driving around town to town campaigning, and they wind up someplace. Between the two of them they've got enough money for a pack of cigarettes and one doughnut. And I thought to myself, isn't that, you know, so they bought the cigarettes and the one doughnut; I guess they split the doughnut for supper that night. But when I thought, you know, you do establish a pretty, they slept in the same bed and everything else. Ed, people would take him in for the night, you know. But it must have been quite a lifestyle, huh, for a while, running for governor in a state like Maine where nobody sounds like they want a Democrat in the house. I was impressed anyhow with that.

AL: What do you think are some of the things that Muskie gave to Maine, sort of in his legacy of having been governor and then senator and then secretary of state?

RW: Well, I think what he gave to Maine, I think there was a big inferiority complex in this state, and I think he gave people a lot of reasons to get rid of that and have a superiority complex. And I seriously do, I think that people have to have some, you know, some idol, maybe not, that's too strong a word, but people need to have somebody they can look up to, and they certainly did have that in Ed Muskie. And, you know, I mean you can't treat him like a saint, but I mean some people do, but I'm not the type that would do that. But I do feel that he was very, he was a, like a turning point in the political history of the state. I mean, everybody who grew up in Maine, until he showed up, if you wanted to be in politics, you had to win the Republican primary. The Republicans picked who they wanted; it was all, there was no such thing as a Democratic candidate for anything. Maybe in Lewiston, maybe in some other mill towns, but certainly not anywhere else. And I think Muskie's showing up changed all that. Not overnight, but he did change it, and, I mean the fact that he was there changed it eventually.

And I thought he was quite bright, which is, you know, that's a little bit unusual, too, because a lot of politicians were hail and well met and everything but they're dumber than, you know, zips, well never mind, they're not very bright. And Ed Muskie was, you know. And that's to his credit, I'm sure. That's my opinion of him, is that what you asked for?

AL: Yeah, sure. What were the rivers like in Maine when you were growing up? Did you see a change in the cleanness of the rivers and other waterways throughout Maine, were you an outdoors person who may have experienced that some?

RW: Well no, I'm not, you better, you know, just skip that [*unintelligible phrase*]. No, I'm not, because I know rivers are a lot cleaner than they used to be, and I know that they, a lot of people are responsible for it, but I always thought Muskie was given a lot of credit for clean air and clean water acts and all that stuff because when he went to Congress as a senator, Lyndon Johnson is running the Congress, the senate at least. And he didn't like Muskie and so he gave him whatever he thought was the poorest job on the list, but it was this environment, the environment, nobody was doing anything about it. Nobody wanted to, they all wanted to be superstars, you know, on the appropriations committee, armed services, things like that. So

Johnson picked a man like Muskie who's a smart son of a gun. He found all the problems, and he started doing something about it. There are other problems in Washington that Muskie did a lot about. The model cities program, you know, really survived some serious tests because of his endorsement and action on model cities legislation that finally was created, finally created it in Washington.

AL: Did you ever have any contact with him during that time you were in charge of model cities?

RW: Well no, no, I never did. No, I just knew about it. I had contact with George Mitchell a lot, actually. You know, when Mitchell, when Curtis got elected governor, one of the things he said to me, he said, "Now, you've got to write my inaugural address." "Yeah, don't worry, I can do that." He said, "George Mitchell wants to help you out," you know. I said, "Good, what can he do?" You know, I don't know. I only know him from working on Muskie's staff. "Well," he says, "why don't you meet him down in B-," so I met him down in Brunswick at the Howard Johnson's restaurant, Mitchell, that is. And we had the draft of a speech that Curtis wanted to give at his inaugural address, first time the governor, and Mitchell had already worked one out somewhat. So between the two of us we wrote it together. And Mitchell said, "You know, we really want to mention, the governor wants to emphasize the fact that it's a question where we've got to have in Maine both pickerels and a payroll." And I said, "I never heard that expression." "Oh," he says, "it's quite commonly used." I said, "But pickerels or payroll, what does that mean?" You know? So we had a long discussion about that. But I mean, but anyhow we did write that speech together and I brought it back up later in the day and Curtis looked and he said, "Pickerels or payrolls?" "Yes," I said, "George likes that." He said, "Okay, we'll use it."

But anyhow, you see how things change. These so-called back room, what do they call that type of briefing you hear, you don't get the, you call it a deep something. Well anyhow, the deep history of things like the political, politics of Maine, when Joe Brennan is governor and Ed Muskie becomes Secretary of State, Joe Brennan has to name somebody a United States senator from Maine. Now, he can do one thing, he could name himself, right, and become a senator. Or he could listen to Ken Curtis and name Ken Curtis because Curtis wanted that job. And he decided to name George Mitchell. Now, he told Curtis that. They couldn't believe that, but the fact is there was never a lot warm blood between the camp that's known as the Brennan camp and the Curtis camp, if you want to call it that. And if you look at the list of names of people who are friends of those two guys, there are only a few people that cross, you know, over from one side to the other.

AL: A fairly well divided -

RW: Yeah, I would say. Now, I don't want to be the author of the book that says the trouble with Maine politics is the Democrats never spoke to each other, because that's not true.

AL: Just those two.

RW: But there are those little things. Now you see, Ken Curtis would love to have been a United States senator, so would Roy Whitcomb, you know, I mean so would a lot of people, I'm

sure. But George Mitchell had a lot of good credentials, but he had a wonderful job for life. He was a U.S. District Judge for the northern district, and that's a lifetime appointment, you don't have to stand for reelection or reappointment or anything. And he didn't want that job, he wanted, he would be glad to be a senator for the interim and then run again, which he did, and then he did and he did. I can't believe how successful he was as a senator, wound up being the Senate majority floor leader, the most powerful seat in the United States Congress.

And, you know, Mitchell, and then he walked away from it. And God, the present president would name him to the Supreme Court or to two or three other things and Mitchell somehow or other said, "No." And he hasn't been that successful, you know, in succes-, I mean they're still fighting in Ireland, aren't they? Why, we'll never know, I mean, except that it's probably never going to be much different over there. But he certainly gave it all its worth. Now they're mentioning him for a Nobel Peace Prize for heaven's sake. But that's amazing, what his growth has, you know, been. And at one point they said, "Oh, he's going to be the next baseball commissioner," but that would be just a step along the way, it's not a great goal to be one have down on your epitaph, baseball commissioner.

AL: How have you seen George Mitchell develop and change over the years?

RW: Oh, quite a bit.

AL: In what ways?

RW: Well, I remember when he was first, when we first met, you know, he was a very prim, tidily dressed sort of a devil, you know, wore these good suits with a real. . . . I remember this particularly because he always wore a necktie with a real tight bow, I mean knot in it. And very tight haircut, you know? And he just seemed like he was, that he was sharp, but he was a little bit up, you know, he was very tight.

AL: Kind of stiff?

RW: Yes, stiff. And I remember he was going to, he was running for something, maybe governor, and I was at an event in Portland at a big, like a church or something, but anyhow there was a crowd there. It might have been the Portland city committee meeting, I don't know. But anyhow Mitchell shows up and two or three other people that I know, I show up, and Mitchell stands over there by the door and says hello to people when they come by. My friend Jane Kilroy, I don't know if you know her, but -

AL: Know the name.

RW: Yeah, nice woman, but -

AL: It's George Mitchell's -

RW: Really a robust, you know, heavy hitter type politician.

AL: George Mitchell's aunt?

RW: An aunt I think, yeah. She goes over to him and she says, "George, get away from that door and get away from that wall, and get in there and mix with those people," you know. "You've got to do that, you can't, you've got to walk around and say hello and all these other things. You can't stay right there." And a couple of other people in the, during the few months mentioned that to him. It seemed to loosen him up because I saw him a year later; hair's kind of shaggy, he's got his jacket on with a, no necktie. You know, but he really seems a little laidback, but I think he was a little more at ease, and I think that's what the people expect. I mean everybody in the room was the same way, you know, they were a little more at ease than he was, and I think that he changed in that respect when he recognized that you have to do that. And, I don't know, he's quite an interesting guy, isn't he?

I used to live in Standish and he used to come to Standish when he was campaigning and go to a home where they had a lot of elderly people, you know, it was like a, it wasn't a rest home, it was a, it was a retirement home as opposed to a rest, not a nursing home. But he always played cribbage with a couple of guys there and they could beat him, but he swore they were not going to beat him again, you know, and he always made a big issue out of that. They loved to see him in Standish for that one reason, to find out how he did in the last game he played, you know, and things like that. But that's very good, nice human touch, you know. He had the ability of doing that everywhere, and quite a nice chap. But anyhow, that's another story. Well, that's the end of that story, I have no more to say. What else do you want to know?

AL: Okay, do you remember meeting Muskie one day?

RW: Well I had to go see him, he was in Portland and he was at the Eastland Hotel, and I had to, I know what it was. I had to go up and bring some information to him, and while there decided I would like to apply for a job because he seemed to be hiring people I know for different things. And I was a newspaper reporter and I had these certain credentials, and I had worked in New Hampshire, and all that jazz. And Don Nicoll was there, too, I remember that. And, but what I really remember is that I had to go say hello to Ed Muskie. He's in a big room in the hotel, and he's got his pants down because there's a guy there who's a tailor and he's outfitting him for a new suit, you know, and they're measuring this and that. And I must say, those tailors do a marvelous job because I, there was, Muskie's not built as well as I thought he was; he's got a rotund belly and a large ass, and this guy's got the tape and the measure. And when he's all done, Muskie gets dressed and he looks wonderful, you know. But I thought to myself, you know, that's amazing because I guess what happens is you sit around long enough you do begin to spread in the wrong places. But anyhow, just that (*unintelligible word*), I remember that particularly, that odd whole thing. I never did get that job either; probably had that wrong attitude.

AL: Do you have any other recollections of Muskie that stick in your mind over the years?

RW: Well, let's see.

AL: Anything related to his sense of humor or his temper or -

RW: Did you put down, did we get in there before, about me driving down the turnpike with him?

AL: Yes, you told Brian [O'Doherty] that at the last interview.

RW: Yeah, that's right.

AL: Or any other impressions or thoughts that you had about Muskie that I haven't thought to ask you?

RW: Well, to be honest with you, no, I haven't. I mean, Muskie to me is like a lot of people in my life. He makes an impression on me, and he's been there, but he's never been that close to me that I felt that he did, you know, change my life that much. Guys like Milt Wheeler, whom I knew quite well, I know quite well, they do, I mean I do know them quite well. I don't know Ed Muskie as well as I know a guy like Milt Wheeler, or even Dick McMahon, or people we know to talk about.

AL: Are there others around your age that you started off being politically interested with that you still keep in contact with?

RW: Well, one guy is the head of the AFL-CIO today in Maine, and he and I worked with Curtis when he was running for Congress, Graham, Ed Graham. Ed Gorham, his last name is Gorham, Ed Gorham. And I see him every week or so, I still, he's up at the State House. He's one of these guys, he was a high school kid and he came into the office for Curtis, of Curtis, with another high school kid and they wanted to do whatever they could do, you know. So we used to figure out things that he could do and run off, you know, run errands in a car, or deliver something to a printer or whatever it was, but I mean, he was a very nice guy. But he got a, but he got a bite of politics and I guess it never left him because the job he has now is really a political job, and he's very good at it. And he's been doing it for a number of years. Other people that I knew, well of course Allen Pease and I, I've known Allen Pease ever since I met him out there at Ken Curtis' house the first day we sat down and he thought he might run for Congress. And Allen was one of the guys that was out there, along with two other professors at the university.

AL: University of Maine?

RW: Yeah, yeah, Gorham, he was a teacher there. But he's been a teacher at several places, and one of them was there. And then Pease used to be, when Curtis got elected governor, Allen became his administrative assistant, which is a key job, and he kept that job for eight years, and then the next governor liked him so well he kept him on, Jim Longley, he gave him some other jobs, you know, for a while. And he's a very nice chap, too. He's now a past president of this organization, The Maine Association of Retirees. I don't know, I'm trying to think of other people I met along the way.

AL: That's okay.

RW: That's okay, I think.

AL: Have any, what are your thoughts on this 2000 election, presidential?

RW: Oh, I think AL Gore will get elected. If he doesn't get elected I think the country's in for a lot of trouble because Gore, the Clinton-Gore administration has encouraged the development of a marvelous business machine that's running this country quite well. Profits are up, jobs are up. Everything that should be up seems to be up. I'm sure a new face, a new group shows up there, they would want to change so many things that they would destroy the confidence people have in the government, and therefore in their lives and therefore in their companies, and there would be chaos, and I think it would be a very serious mistake to vote for somebody else, other than Gore. And I don't want to comment on the others, but that's why I think Gore should win. And I will vote for him, in fact I did yesterday at the local caucus or whatever. There were only eleven people there.

AL: Small turnout in some of the towns.

RW: Small turnout, yeah. Yeah, and I'll tell you something else, our town was sent two delegates for the other guy, four for Gore, to the -

AL: Two for Bradley and four for Gore.

RW: Yeah, because he had enough people there to qualify for two of them. And I must say, that's a very complicated formula. That girl had a computer punching out numbers like mad just to count up those numbers to get six delegates, six delegates, yeah. Oh, maybe it's ten delegates. It's six for Gore and four for Bradley. No wild cards, no independents. But that's, we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, you know.

AL: Right, Super Tuesday.

RW: See that, yeah, but it's another type of an election. I mean there'll be more than eleven people vote in my town tomorrow, right, for their presidential preference, primary, I guess. It's very, I don't think, I mean I don't know how valid those are really. They've got to be decided finally at the state convention I guess, you know. Which will be -

AL: Now, go ahead.

RW: No, I was going to say which will be interesting to see how they, it shakes out, you know, to speak.

AL: Do you have any final thoughts on Ed Muskie or Maine history, or your own involvement that we haven't talked about that you'd like to add before we end today?

RW: Well, it's interesting to note that Maine, Maine's economy is really based on raw material, you know, like the forest and the agriculture and the fishing. And I don't know how

we're going to survive if we begin to depend on things like the so-called telemarketing industry. That is so much of a fly-by-night concept in my mind that I'm afraid a lot of people are moving in here, a lot of people are making money at it today, it could all disappear in a month because it's based on people's ability to pay.

And the credit card debt in this country already is so many billion dollars, it staggers the mind. If somebody called those debts, they would stop, the economy would stop. I hate to think about things like that, but that's what, if you look at the future carefully in the next nine or ten years, things like that may change. We, maybe our future, if it's built on electronic, the telephone ringing like that thing out in the other room, I think we're in trouble. We can't possibly last. And also because the world is this global village and we're pricing ourselves out of the market for a lot of jobs, they're going to go to countries where guys will work for two or three dollars a day and get their work done. That's going to be coming home to roost more often than we think. Well, so I mean those things kind of worry me a little bit. I don't know what a guy like Muskie could have done, you know, in regard to that. You're just asking me my opinion of the future; it's not very good, is it?

I think the people's spirits are good, and there's always something, you know, around the corner, maybe. I believe that. But I think we have to be realists and think about those things that we're doing. We build these, thousand new jobs in Orono to work for Envisionet, you know, they're coming. Where are they coming from, you know, and how much, I don't know. They've already got thousands of jobs around apart from Envisionet, from MBNA, from Talk America, two or three others, you know, and I can't imagine, well I just can't, that's all there is to it. Maybe I'm just not in the right groove, swinging in the right orbit.

And as far as my last thoughts about Muskie are, I don't know, if Maine hadn't had a guy like Muskie, I don't think they would have invented one. It was very fortunate for a man, that man to show up in the time that he did, you know. The time was right for somebody like that. He was right for it. And there are parts of this country where there are, that circumstance was not fulfilled, I don't think, you know. But not so in Maine. And I might say, this is a good project. Keep it up.

AL: Thank you very much for your time.

RW: You're welcome.

AL: We appreciate it.

RW: I'll be curious-

End of Interview