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Wood, Frank oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

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Interview with Frank Wood by Andrea L’Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Wood, Frank

Interviewer

L’Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

October 16, 2003

Place

Alfred, Maine

ID Number

MOH 412

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Biographical Note

Frank P. Wood was born in 1949 in Sanford, Maine. His father was Lawrence Wood, a farm machinery salesman, and his mother was Arlene Wood, a secretary and college administrator. He became interested in politics at an early age, working on campaigns throughout the 1960s. Frank served in the Maine legislature from 1977 to 1985, serving on the taxation and agriculture committees.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: family background; York County, Maine; 1977 to 1985 Maine Legislature; John Martin; campaign styles of Mitchell, Muskie, and Brennan; term limits in Maine; Vietnam War and anti-war activities; 1960 presidential campaign; 1964 presidential campaign; and the 1968 vice presidential campaign.

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Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Frank Wood at his business in Alfred, Maine on October 16th, the year 2003, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could you start by giving me your full name and spelling it?

Frank Wood: Frank P. Wood, F-R-A-N-K, -P-, W-O-O-D.

AL: And where and when were you born?

FW: I was born in Sanford in 1949.

AL: And is that the area you grew up in?

FW: Grown up in York County all my life, within this thirty mile radius.

AL: And what was that York County area like when you were growing up?

FW: Very much rural, not at all like it is today. I grew up in Sanford and then in Alfred and Waterboro and they were basically farming communities with very few people. There was a mill in Waterboro, but it was a much different time. It was really rural, when a snow storm came we might be snowed in for a few days, it was not as fast paced as it is today.

AL: And what were your parents' names and their occupations?

FW: My father's name was Lawrence Wood and he was a farm machinery salesman, and my mother is Arlene Wood and she was a secretary and college administrator.

AL: And when you were growing up, what was the community like politically and religiously and economically?

FW: It was probably, economically, a fairly depressed area. Most of the people that worked in the mill got minimum wage, and the rest of the people either worked on farms or away. Politically, this area has always been fairly Republican; it was Republican back then, even the people that worked in the mills tended to be Republican. And religiously, I would say it was dominated by Protestant, the nearest Catholic Church at the time would have been in Sanford and, although there might have been some people that went to that they were not a large part of the community.

AL: Now, your parents, were they involved in community or civic activities?

FW: They were to a certain extent. My mother was involved in church activities and that sort of thing. My father just, that wasn't his cup of tea, so he didn't do much that way. And then, my mother's one of those people that likes to join things: she was in lodge groups and she did some work in party, political party activities, but most of it was either church or lodge related.

AL: Did you have a sense of what your parents felt politically growing up?

FW: My parents tended to be Democrats. I mean, they, their, the way they thought about issues tended to be for the working class. And it was unusual, because when we were growing up in Alfred, particularly when we started getting involved in politics, they were a distinct minority and I think the first time we held a caucus at our house there was like eight people. But I sensed they were Democrats. My father wasn't terribly active, but his political beliefs would be Democratic.

AL: Did they ever discuss politics at the dinner table or anything?

FW: Now when we were really young, but when, probably from fourth grade on there was some political discussion at the table, especially during election time. And there were also discussion of issues that were political in a sense but not, you know, either economic issues, or social issues.

AL: And, I'm trying to think of how to ask this. In going back a little bit, your parents probably grew up during the Depression years.

FW: Yes.

AL: And you said you were born in 1949?

FW: That's correct.

AL: Did they have memories that they shared with you of what it was like? Were they this area?

FW: They were in this area, and I think they shared with me to the extent that they were very concerned that people should always have a job. I mean, when I wanted to take off a year from school that was, people needed to work, people needed to save, people needed to take care of themselves. So there was that sense that they talked about it. And they did share, both of them grew up on farms, and so they did talk about life on the farm and stories about relatives and that sort of thing, especially my father, he was a great storyteller. But I think most of the Depression came through in their attitudes about working and saving and those types of things.

AL: And going back to what we were talking about before, I was going to ask you about your parents and -

(Tape paused.)

AL: So you grew up in this area, and when did you start to have an interest in politics?

FW: Actually it's strange in that I remember as a child, a very young child, going, we did not have a TV set and we went to my grandmother's house, and I remember watching one of the Democratic conventions for Adlai Stevenson. I remember that image as a child, of him speaking. But my first involvement was when I was in the sixth grade in Alfred, and it was during the [John F.] Kennedy election and we had, we chose sides and we had debates and we had a mock election. Being from Alfred we lost, the Kennedy side lost, but that was really my first involvement. And then I went on during the [Lyndon B.] Johnson campaign and then became much more after that, but my first real sort of feeling for politics was the Kennedy election.

AL: In 1960. And so then '64 you were even more involved?

FW: Well, by that time I was involved, I was still a teenager, I was probably a sophomore or a junior in high school. And we had a Democratic headquarters in Sanford and I helped man the headquarters, passed out literature, made phone calls and that sort of thing and, you know, was active that way.

AL: Do you know where that interest came from? Do you have a sense of that?

FW: I don't have a sense other than my parents' interest. I think with the, with the Kennedy election, for some reason, and I think this is probably part of my upbringing, he was sort of the underdog, especially around here, and I've always sort of gravitated towards the underdog. I don't know why, I mean I assume if I was living in Boston and Kennedy was the popular one maybe I would have gone with Nixon, but I just felt he was the underdog and that sort of has been the driving force.

AL: So during high school you were involved in those, and did you, do you recall in '68 when Muskie was running for vice president?

FW: Yes, in '68 I did get involved. I was in college by that time. Sixty-eight, he was running for vice president.

AL: Vice president with Hubert Humphrey.

FW: I remember the, watching the convention on TV. I remember that we had a headquarters and I remember working I think at both the Portland headquarters and the Sanford headquarters, doing stuff. At first blush I was not a big Humphrey-Muskie supporter because of the Vietnam War; I was very much involved in anti-war activities. But I sort of came around at the end when I realized that this was the best choice we had, and Nixon was not a good choice.

AL: Did you recall who initially out of the Democrats that you supported when -?

FW: Sixty-eight, I'm trying to think, I liked McCarthy a great deal. I mean, I didn't go to New Hampshire, and McCarthy's presence in Maine was not large; there was some activity. And I liked Bobby Kennedy. I remember going to the Democratic convention, I think it was, '68, was it in Augusta, I believe it was in Augusta.

AL: The state convention?

FW: Yeah, and I remember at that point they wanted Muskie to be a "favorite son" from Maine so that when he went to the convention he would control a certain amount of votes. I think I'm correct; I'm not sure. And I remember at the time not thinking that was a good idea, and I remember I think I probably did some work for the alternatives, for other delegates. I was not a delegate; I was just going as an observer.

AL: And what sort of things did you do in terms of your protesting the Vietnam War?

FW: Well, I was, went to USM, and we had, you know, we had marches, we had all of those things. One of the things in which Muskie was involved in, my freshman year we had a whole week devoted, I was the chairman, we had a whole week devoted to Vietnam, pro and con, the university provided funds for it. And the university was really just a day university. When weekends came, everyone scattered, because there was no campus, I was at the Portland campus, there was no housing and most of us were commuters or lived in apartments. And so the program was supposed to run just for that week. And we were able, we contacted a lot of different anti-war people, we had Howard Zinn and a number of people, but we were able to get Muskie to speak, and he was going to speak on a Saturday. And I remember we just thought this probably isn't going to work because it's not, a Saturday is just not anything going on on campus, and I remember it was, I introduced him and it was very, very well attended. And I thought, you know, that, although I didn't agree with him at the time, I thought he made a very good case for his point of view.

AL: Did you see his views or his stance change at all over those years?

FW: I think it did, I mean I think even that, at that point when he was speaking, it was much more, he sort of seemed to be much more understanding of the anti-war point of view, which I'm not always sure he had that. But I think at that point he was sort of moving more with us than I'd seen before.

AL: And, um, in terms of the campus, were there a lot of students? Because at the time you were in college, there must have been a lot of people your age were the ones over there fighting.

FW: Yes.

AL: What was the feeling among students?

FW: Well, the Portland campus at that time was basically made up of, you know, working class, middle class families. There wasn't, there were very few in higher economic brackets. And for a lot of these kids, they were probably the first people in their families going to school, or one of the first people. Initially when we started out, there was a lot of resentment towards the anti-war people, I think there was a lot of support among the unions and labor people, for the war, I think there's a tendency to do that. But as it progressed, and especially after Kent State, things turned around. I think for some of the students, they were really glad to be here because they got a student deferral. While others, they felt that that was sort of unfair, why should they be there, and some gave up their student deferrals and went basically were, when they had the lottery, they were open. I was one of those, fortunately I had a high lottery number, but I just decided that it wasn't right. I didn't want to go to Canada, but at the same time I didn't think it was right for other people to have to go and for me to have the luxury of being a student.

AL: I have a question as someone from the newer generation looking at, say, the war in Iraq today, and the feeling that people around the country have felt, who have been against the idea of the war from early on and sort of been viewed as unpatriotic because of that, was there that sense on campus, too, that the people protesting were unpatriotic?

FW: Very much so. There was a feeling among faculty and students that somehow what we were doing was aiding, I mean, back then I think it was even worse than it is now, I mean you were accused of aiding the enemy, that anti-dissent was aiding the enemy. And I think one of the things that I liked about Muskie's speech at the time was that he was, you know, recognizing that it was all right to dissent, that there could be different views and it was not a sign of weakness on the country's part or a sign of being unpatriotic. But there was a great deal And the group that I was in that ran the Vietnam discussion week was basically a club that tried to bring in varying speakers on campus, and we brought the communist candidate for president, we brought Indian representatives from northern Maine. So we tended to sort of push, and we made it clear that we were not taking any sides but we just thought that the campus should have all these viewpoints. So sometimes we were not viewed with a great deal of fondness.

AL: Now, where did you go after that in terms of political involvement? I know you were in the state legislature.

FW: Yes, I, after college I took a job teaching at Head Start, and in 1972 when I was teaching at Head Start I was approached by the McGovern people to be one of the coordinators for the southern part of Maine during the election. And I took a leave of absence and I ran the York County, I might have had some of Oxford [County], but I think it was mostly York County program for McGovern. I was a paid staffer and, you know, organized various towns and did all of that. After that I went back to Head Start and was very happy.

When the legislature became Democratic for the first time in, both legislative, the house became Democratic in '74, people encouraged me to go to Augusta and maybe get a job. My brother who had also been involved in politics, had been a page in the legislature in the sixties when they first, the first time the Democrats took it over, Johnson landslide. So I went up and I met Ed Pert who was the clerk of the house at the time, and he hired me to be the sergeant-at-arms. And so I worked there for two years, and after that ran for the legislature from this area and served two terms in the house and then two terms in the senate, and then sort of stayed on and did, I was an aide to the senate president. I worked, I was the state purchasing agent, Brennan had appointed me to that, and then I was the financial officer for the attorney general's office, and then at that point I decided it was time to do what I wanted to do.

AL: And during your time in the legislature, what years was it again?

FW: I was elected in '77 and it would have been eight years, so '85, '77 to '85, '86.

AL: So you worked with John Martin?

FW: Yes, I did.

AL: And what were your impressions of him?

FW: I liked John a great deal, and I think to a certain extent he's gotten a bum rap. He could be just as difficult and obnoxious to Democrats as Republicans. I mean, there were times when I opposed John on some lumber issues and I thought that he was going to, we were going to come to blows. I mean, it was very obvious that he was not happy. But at the same time he had a lot, a lot of knowledge, and he could be very generous. We had friends up at Eagle Lake and we went up there, and John was always, you know, if he had a cabin you could stay in the cabin, if you needed anything, it didn't matter what your politics were, so he could be very generous. And I liked him, and we got along all right. There were times when he was not happy and I was not happy.

AL: And so would you characterize him as being very partisan but also being able to reach across the aisle on issues?

FW: I think he could be extremely partisan. I think he could also reach across the aisle. And I think there was a group of moderate Republicans he could reach out to, but I think he also believed in the institution and oftentimes people thought that he was, you know, rigid or his rulings were unfair. But they were based on his love of that institution and what was proper, what was the way to go, not, sometimes it was not pleasant but it was, his rulings were based on

the law and the way parliamentary procedure follows. And I think for a lot of legislators, they do not spend a lot of time understanding the process. John knew the process, backwards and forwards, and he could use it to his advantage.

AL: Now, you were gone from the legislature by the time that term limits came in.

FW: Yes, yes.

AL: What do you see, or what's your perspective on how that is going to affect long term planning and sort of what you're talking about, learning the whole [process]?

FW: I think it was a mistake. I mean I think that the legislature, when I was there, there was a good turnover every year, a natural turnover probably anywhere from ten to thirty percent some years, so there was that new blood coming in. And my attitude is the voters should decide when someone's term is up. I think what has happened is, one, to become a leader, since you only have four terms in the house or senate, you have to start the first day you're there deciding if you want to be speaker of the house or majority leader or minority leader, and maybe by your third term you're there and you serve two terms, or maybe it's the fourth time you're there. That's not a long time to learn what's going on and how to run the house.

And also, I think what happens is the staff and the lobbyists become much more powerful, because you don't have time to learn and you have to rely on other people. And the lobbyists were always powerful even when I was there, but people who had some kind of institutional history could say, wait a minute, that's not what you were saying three years ago, you know, why are you now changing, you know. So I don't, in the long run I don't think it's a good thing for the state. I think that we will lose a lot of institutional history and a lot of leadership potential.

AL: Were there particular committees that you were on, or people that you worked with closely on particular issues, that you recall?

FW: Most of the time I was there I was on either the agriculture committee or taxation. I was on agriculture because I really, I mean I grew up on a farm, I really loved farming. It was pretty, by the time I chose to be on agriculture, it was pretty irrelevant to York County, I mean there wasn't a lot of farm activity within my district, but it was something I liked. Taxation policy was something that I was just interested in, because most people, I mean, I view taxation policy as a, you're making social decisions. Most people view it as you have some programs, then you find the money and you do that through taxation. And I argue that how you find the money through taxation is much as a social program as the social programs themselves. I mean, 'Who do you tax? How do you tax them? What percentage do you tax them?' all have implications for people.

I've worked with, I worked with, I liked Ed Pert, he was a person who really taught me the ropes. I've worked a lot with Bonnie Post who was the house chairman of taxation when I served. Gerry Conley, who was the majority leader and then the president of the senate in my last term was just super, I mean he was very helpful, really, I learned a lot from him. I think those are probably, you know, and John Martin, the people that I really enjoyed.

AL: Was Barry Hobbins in the legislature at that time?

FW: Barry was in the house when I was in the house. He then went on to the senate after I got out. I knew Barry because I had, when I had worked on the McGovern campaign I worked in Saco, in fact met my former future wife through that, she was the clerk of the house, assistant clerk of the house and she had grown up in politics. So I knew Barry. But I think, you know, we worked on some issues but there wasn't, we knew each other and we liked each other but there wasn't a lot going on there.

AL: And you mentioned earlier that there were some moderate Republicans in the legislature that would work with the Democrats. Do you recall who they were?

FW: I was afraid you were going to ask that.

AL: I know, I'm talking about a long time ago.

FW: There was a person from Brewer who ended up becoming a Democrat. I can't remember his name. But I think, I mean, I think the other thing that, and it wasn't necessarily moderate Republicans, but I think and what I've noticed changed in Augusta, I think back then people were partisan, but in a reasonable sort of way.

AL: Civility.

FW: Civility. And I would, I mean I remember on a couple of occasions getting up and speaking against my opponent and tearing them apart, their arguments. I thought I was tearing them apart, who knows? And after it was all over we'd have lunch or we'd have a drink at night. And I think that's lost. So I think those people, I mean I remember being on, when we were on the taxation committee, and we had a rule that we'd try to get unanimous reports. And it might mean that Democrats would have to give some, and it also meant Republicans would have to give some, and I bet towards the end of it ninety-five to better of our reports came out unanimous. But again, it was just, you understood going in that you weren't going to get everything.

And I could, I mean there was a person on my committee who was probably the most conservative person I've ever met in my life in terms of issues, unfortunately I can't remember his name. He passed away a couple of years ago. We were the best of friends and people would say to me, "How?" Well, we both liked farming and all that stuff so we talked about that, and I could almost, I could say to him, "Look, this is what I need, what do you need," and we would work something out, and that was the way it is. I think now, because they're there for such a short time that they don't develop those relationships, and I also think that a lot of them live in apartments or they're commuting and so they don't have that connection. There were a couple of bars in Augusta, there was the Holiday Inn, every night you went there, there were legislators there, and you could sit down at a table and have a couple of drinks and solve all the problems of the day. And I don't see that happening, I just don't see that happening now.

AL: Are there other areas of your political life that you've been in the public, in terms of outside of the Maine legislature? You mentioned some things that you did after.

FW: Well, I did stay in politics in that I stayed in Augusta and worked for the attorney general's office and I was the purchasing agent. I also was the county commissioner in York County for, I think two terms, and that was after the legislature. You know, and I still stayed active in terms of going to caucuses and being on the county committee, although the last, probably the last five or six years I've done very, very little politically.

AL: Now, when you look back at Senator Muskie having been from Maine and ran for vice president and president, what are your overall impressions of him? Have you learned more in later years?

FW: Well, he was always sort of a, he was always to me, sort of intimidating in his presence. And I probably met, the first time I met him was probably in the, maybe during the Johnson campaign, because we had a huge picnic in York County that the sheriff's department put on every year; he was a Democrat. And I think he spoke at, he was always there and he spoke at those, and so I remember him speaking and I remember sort of, at that time I was a teenager and sort of being intimidated. And I went up and shook his hand but it was like, you know, you were in the presence of someone that was very important. Then I went through a sort of a falling out because of Vietnam.

Then after that, you know, when I became much more active in the Democratic Party and served in office I would go to functions, they always had a lobster bake at the Muskie house in Kennebunk. When I worked in some campaigns, I was coordinator for George Mitchell's first Senate campaign in this area, and so I would see him, you know, when we were on the campaign trail I would run into Muskie. And I became much more impressed, I mean he was just very knowledgeable. In a way, I think, and it was interesting because about that time there was a book that came out that said, it was by, oh, I want to say Aspel [*sic* Asbell].

AL: Yes, The Senate Nobody Knows.

FW: The Senate Nobody Knows, and I read it and I thought it was wonderful. It painted a wonderful picture of Muskie, not terribly flattering in his dealing with his staff, but I had known most of his staff and they had told me this already, that he was just very much in charge. As a matter of fact I, Mary McAleney who, I think it was Mary McAleney who worked for him. He never knew her name, and every time they had a campaign appearance where she was at, she'd go up and say, "Hi, I'm Mary McAleney, I work for you." And she did this repeatedly until at the end of the campaign she went up to him, he said, "I know who you are, you're Mary McAleney. You work for me." But that's the sort of, you know, but I came to respect him.

And having served in the legislature then, when I was in the senate Democrats weren't in control, and it was very, very difficult being a Democrat in a, although it was a close, we were not that far off, there were quite a few Democrats. But I realized how difficult it must be and how difficult it must have been for him to be governor with both houses controlled by Republicans, who probably really didn't like him at all, and so I began to realize how much he had

accomplished.

And I got to, I mean I really, I mean I worked with him in terms, I mean wouldn't say I worked with him, I, when I worked on campaigns I remember . . . I think my last contact with him, we were running some senate campaigns and one of the, I was running a senate campaign and a house campaign and the senate campaign was in Rumford. And it was a good Democrat [who was running] but he just, the Rumford area had had Republicans and we wanted to get this Democrat elected. And I remember calling Gayle Cory, who was a wonderful person, and Muskie was in his law office then, and I said to Gayle, "Can I get a letter from Muskie saying," you know, I grew up in Rumford, I'm, you know, blah-blah-blah, all of that, and I know, you know, "and this election is coming up and it's very important." At the same time I had a house candidate that was running from Kennebunk, Kennebunkport, which was Muskie's home at that time, and I said, you know, "I hate to push it, can I get another letter from him saying," you know. And she said, "Write the letters, send them down, and I can't promise you anything but I'm sure he'll want to do it." And lo and behold, those letters came out.

And I think, I think in both cases they made a difference. I know in the Kennebunk one, you know, people would come up to the cam---, they said, "Oh, I got a letter from Ed Muskie and, you know, he says you're a good guy." So I thought that was really nice, because here was this guy who was secretary of state, who had done all this stuff, and I'm asking him to write a letter for a representative of Maine? Or a senator? And he was still that much interested and engaged that he was willing to help out at that very low level, and so I thought that was incredible.

So I did, and then, you know, I met, I got to, I didn't know any of this children, I mean I knew them, but I got to know his wife Jane and went to, you know, again, it was mostly fund raisers and that sort of thing. But I think one of the interesting things is, after he was, when he sort of retired, when he left secretary of state's office, there was a party put on in York County just to honor him. It was not a political thing, it was not to raise money for the Democrats, I can't remember where the money went, but I think it was for a local thing, but Democrats put it on. And it was well attended, it was in Kennebunk.

And I remember, I was fortunate enough to be at the table that the Muskie's were at, and it was just amazing to see how much Jane [Muskie], it was like she lived for Ed Muskie, I mean it was, you know. I'm sure she loved her children but it was . . . And I remember her saying and Muskie saying that the one thing he really enjoyed about retirement was going grocery shopping, because it's the one thing he could, you know, never did, you know, I just, it's great fun. So my attitude changed, I became much more, first in awe, then disappointed, and then sort of a realization of how important he was to Maine and politics and what a very good person he could be, other than treating his staff.

AL: And did you say you also had a chance to work on George Mitchell's campaign, and did you get to meet him?

FW: Yes, I had been involved with George Mitchell since his race for governor in '74; I think that's when he ran. I had known him before that, he was the, interested me when I was at University of Maine and we were working on Muskie coming. George Mitchell was the

chairman of the Democratic Party in Maine, or he had some position, maybe he was national committeeman, I think he was chairman of the Democratic Party, and we worked with him to get Muskie here. But I was involved in the, my former wife was a staffer for his governor's race, and I worked on that. And then when he ran for Senate I was one of the field coordinators. And so again I spent, you know, some time traveling with him and doing a lot of work. So I've known him for probably more than thirty years I guess, thirty-five years.

AL: What was your impression of him, his style and how it was alike or how it was different than Senator Muskie's, because I know he spent a lot of time with Senator Muskie and wondered what you observed.

FW: I was always impressed with his intellect. I mean, he was just a brilliant, he is a brilliant person. I think in the beginning he was a little, I'm not sure if uncomfortable is the right word, but I think he was a little stiff in his campaigning style and he came off as being very bright and maybe not in a good way, you know, that there was some kind of separation between him and the average person. But as he campaigned more and more I think that improved, I think it was just a question of campaigning.

Some people, some people really just don't like campaigning. I mean, Joe Brennan who I think the world of, I don't think is probably the best campaigner there is. He's just not, you can tell he's doing it but he's not doing it with enthusiasm. Whereas when I saw Muskie in the later years, you know, it was, it was, he was enjoying it and there was kind of a, they knew what to do.

A little anecdote which is sort of going far afield, but again it sort of sums up the way they did things. I remember we went to Governor [Ken] Curtis' inaugural ball. I was, I think I was in college then, this was his last one. And one of the people I was with, a woman who had this very pretty dress, went through the receiving line and when she got to Jane Muskie, Jane said to her, "You know, I've been admiring that dress all evening, that's very pretty. Where did you get it?" Now, she might have said that to every ten people, but it was just that way of engaging.

And there were times when I knew people were talking to Muskie and he didn't, I'm sure he didn't know who they were. I mean they had people that he campaigned for in the fifties, but he would just sort of be very engaging so that you didn't get this, this strange like, look, "Really, who are you?" You know? And in the beginning Mitchell was very good with names, but there was that kind of stiffness, I think he, you know. And he certainly went on to be very, very important I think in twentieth century Maine politics, Democratic politics. It would be Muskie and then Mitchell would be the second standout.

AL: Are there others that I haven't asked you about, or aspects of your political involvement that you feel is important to talk about?

FW: I can't, I mean I can't, I mean when you begin to, you know, think about it, I mean there was a lot of involvement. I did lots and lots of different things but I think I, I'm sure once you leave I'll say, "Oh, why didn't I tell her about that?" But anyway, no, I think I've covered everything.

AL: Well, thank you very much.

FW: Thank you.

End of Interview