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Nicoll, Don oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

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Interview with Don Nicoll by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Nicoll, Don

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

June 29, 2004

Place

Lewiston, Maine

ID Number

MOH 436

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Biographical Note

Donald Eugene "Don" Nicoll was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on August 4, 1927, and grew up in the West Roxbury section of the city. He is the son of George and Mary Nicoll. He attended Robert Gould Shaw Junior High School and Boston English High School and graduated from Colby College in Waterville, Maine in 1949, majoring in History with a minor in Government. Don met his future wife, Hilda Farnum, also a Colby student, when they worked in the resort town of Ocean Park, Maine, in the summer of 1944. Nicoll began his graduate work at Pennsylvania State College in 1949, where he received a teaching fellowship in the Department of History. His graduate studies concentrated on American history, specifically the period from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War .. His M.A. (1952) thesis was on the Alien and Sedition Acts.

Starting in 1951, Nicoll and his family settled in Buckfield, Maine where he picked apples and taught part time at Stephen's High School, located in Rumford. Nicoll began working as an announcer for WLAM radio in Lewiston, Maine. He became a reporter and then news editor for WLAM and WLAM-TV. In June 1954, Nicoll left WLAM to become Executive Secretary of the Democratic State Committee at the request of Frank M. Coffin, who has just become chairman. Mr. Coffin was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from Maine's Second Congressional

District in 1956 and Nicoll went to Washington, DC, as his administrative assistant, continuing in that post until December 1960, the end of Congressman Coffin's second term. Mr. Coffin ran for governor in 1960 and was defeated. After the election Senator Edmund S. Muskie asked Nicoll to join his staff as legislative assistant and news secretary. Nicoll served in that position until 1962, when he became administrative assistant. He continued in that post until 1971, when he became personal advisor to Senator Muskie. He left the senate office in mid-1972.

From 1972 until his retirement in 2005 Nicoll worked as a program and policy planner, first as a consultant (1972-73), then as chairman and chief executive officer of the New England Land Grant Universities Joint Operations Committee (1973-1975), then as coordinator of planning and vice president for planning and public affairs for the Maine Medical Center (1975-1986), then as a consultant (1986-2005). His clients were primarily in the non-profit sector and included, universities, libraries, education associations, health care organizations and social service agencies. He also worked as a volunteer, heading a variety of public policy projects, including the Maine Task Force on Government Reorganization, the Maine State Compensation Commission, the Maine (Mental Health) Systems Assessment Commission, the Maine Consortium for Health Professions Education, the Southern Maine Community Television Consortium, the Maine Special Commission on Government Reorganization (co-chair), the Board of Visitors of the University of Southern Maine's Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, the Maine-Aomori Sister-State Advisory Council and the Governor's Allagash Wilderness Waterway Working Group.

From 1998-2005, Don Nicoll was the Director of the Edmund S. Muskie Oral History Project at Bates College.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: how Demonstration Cities became Model Cities; staff and issues of the Government Operations Committee; Senator Muskie and staff relations; factors contributing to the failure of the sugar beet venture in Maine; conversion of closed air force bases in Maine; and TFX aircraft dispute and investigation.

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Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Donald E. Nicoll on June 29th, the year 2004, at the Muskie Archives at Bates College, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. And Don, we're going to continue our discussions today. I think first of all you wanted to follow up on an anecdote you were telling about Model Cities and how it changed its name from Demonstration Cities.

Don Nicoll: Well, the original proposal for the legislation labeled it Demonstration Cities, and the reason was that the administration wanted to have demonstration projects with a new approach to dealing with the areas of the city that had suffered from decay, what in the old days had been targeted for urban renewal. And the concern that had developed revolved around massive clearance of areas of the cities and rebuilding, and, in the worst cases, such developments as the very large high rise public housing replacing what had been manageable neighborhoods, and restorable neighborhoods.

Just as a side recollection, when I was growing up in Boston I attended the English High School, which at the time was located in the old South End. The school building had been built around the time of the Civil War and was still there. It was an area of considerable decay and it was targeted later in the 1950s and into the early '60s for urban renewal. When one looks back at the areas in the South End and the adjacent areas, you see in old maps and photographs a series of small parks with brick housing surrounding it, and then neighborhood shopping areas on the streets. And with the movement of the population, that is the upwardly mobile population, out into the suburban areas, those areas decayed and lower and lower income people moved in and the housing deteriorated under absentee landlords. But instead of restoring those, under Ed Logue, L-O-G-U-E, who was the big example of an urban renewal person, there was total

clearance in that area and old buildings were torn down. The historic areas were lost and many of the very attractive features of community living in an urban setting were lost. Well, the administration wanted to move away from this, led by people like Bob Wood, Robert C. Wood who was the Undersecretary of Housing and Urban Development at the time. And so they proposed a program that would have as I recall fifty model cities, or as they called them demonstration projects in the cities.

By the time the legislation came forward in the House and the Senate, there was considerable agitation and demonstrating on the war in Vietnam and on the subject of Civil Rights, and we were having incidents in a number of cities, riots in fact after '64-'65, in that period and on into the, after Model Cities was passed. But Demonstration Cities became a red flag, if you will, for conservatives in the Congress and outside the Congress. And one of the things that we proposed in negotiations with the Johnson administration for rewriting the legislation to make it more palatable to the middle-of-the-road people and some of the conservatives in the Congress, was to change the name from Demonstration Cities to Model Cities. And we were told, in no uncertain terms by Joe Califano as I remember, that Demonstration Cities was the name, that was what the President wanted and it would stay. And so it did through passage of the legislation. Not through passage of the legislation; I believe that the, I have to go back and look this up, but I think in the final stages somehow the name got switched. We didn't switch it, but somebody else did. And finally it became Model Cities, in spite of the President.

AL: And was Model Cities the name that you had suggested to them to change it to?

DN: Yes. Model was fine, model did not conjure up the images of violent demonstrations. But Johnson for some reason held on to that as long as he could, but then embraced the new name after it was enacted and praised by people.

AL: Let's move now to the IGR Subcommittee, or the Intergovernmental Relations Subcommittee and the work that was going on there.

DN: The Intergovernmental Relations [Sub]Committee was an outgrowth of work that had been going on, starting in the Eisenhower administration on the subject of federal-state relations. And as a matter of fact, Senator Muskie's predecessor, Senator Payne, had done some work in that arena because he was, he too was a former governor. And there was a lot of interest, and some concern, over how the federal government and the states should divide up responsibilities and how the federal government should support the states and local governments in managing some problems that were common to the states. Didn't necessarily fit into the Interstate Commerce clause of the Constitution, but they were common enough problems that there was a national interest and federal action.

The, there was an advisory commission on intergovernmental relations formed; Senator Muskie served on that. And in the Senate, a Subcommittee on Intergovernmental Relations was created in the then Government Operations Committee, and Senator Muskie became chairman of that. And that committee had its own staff, and he was able to hire individuals who were directly

responsible to him. The three staff directors, well there were at least four, in order: first was David Bruce Walker, who had been a professor of government at Bowdoin College and later was on the faculty, I believe may today, 2004, be an emeritus member of the faculty at Wesleyan University. And he was followed by Edwin Webber, W-E-B-B-E-R, known as "Ike", who was from Maine and was a political scientist as well. And Ike was succeeded by Charles Smith, who had been I believe in the Department of Housing and Urban Development and a long time civil servant. No, I've reversed that. Charlie was there, and then Ike Webber, and then Ike was succeeded by Alvin From, F-R-O-M, who was the last of the directors of that subcommittee under Senator Muskie.

And that committee dealt primarily with the questions of revenue sharing, management of federal mandates, a lot of it was study work rather than legislative work, but there was some legislation for modifying the relationship between the state and federal government. And ultimately, the Intergovernmental Relations Subcommittee became a very important sort of laboratory for studying new approaches to such matters as the federal budget. And the federal budget legislation originated there, and some of the staff from the subcommittee and from the Muskie office went to the Budget Committee after it was formed, but most of that took place after I had left the staff.

We were faced in the '60s, starting back when John Donovan was administrative assistant from '59 until '62, early '62, with trying to manage the legislative work for a senator from a relatively small state with a relatively small staff, and keep on top of the issues that were important to him on behalf of his constituency, and also his responsibilities as member of three significant committees, even though they weren't his first choice, and all of the other legislation that was coming through the Congress at the time. This was the period when we were not only dealing with budgets, appropriations, matters of trade policy, agriculture policy, urban development and housing, education aid, etcetera, but civil rights and Medicare, and a host of very demanding legislation.

Early on we, I guess I was the one who did this primarily, but in 1962 when I became the administrative assistant, I started dividing up the responsibility for legislative, staff legislative oversight. And we linked the oversight for legislative work to staff work on cases, so that the staff members who were responsible, for example, for service connected cases were also responsible for defense legislation. And those who worked on agricultural issues were responsible for agricultural legislation. And the committee staff work, where we had staff members on the major committees, reported in effect, to different members of the staff.

And in that period from 1962 until roughly 1969, I took responsibility for the environmental work, particularly starting in '63 when the subcommittee was created, for the banking and currency work connected with housing and urban development, and for the intergovernmental relations and government operations work, and other members of the staff took responsibility for other areas.

For example, when George Mitchell was executive assistant, because of his background as an

anti-trust lawyer working on banking cases, he took on all of the banking and currency work dealing with banking legislation and monetary legislation. He also took on the work of the area redevelopment administration, and the federal investment in economic development, and a couple of other areas. And he generally supervised those areas dealing with agriculture and with the Defense Department, etcetera. So there was a close link in the way we managed the constituent relationships and constituent service and the flow of ideas and the responses to legislation on certain specific issues.

The, as one will see if you listen to the interview that I have with Leon Billings, who became the staff director for the Subcommittee on Air and Water Pollution, Senator Muskie wanted to deal with as few people as possible and he expected me in particular to protect his time, and not have him inundated with staff people coming in. And that caused real problems, particularly for Leon, at the beginning of his work as the head of the Subcommittee on Air and Water Pollution. And there's a little, fascinating little bit of by play there that emerged fully only long after we had both worked for Senator Muskie, on the relationship between the subcommittee staff and the Senator, and the staff, notably the AA, and the perspective from the subcommittee staff and the perspective from the senator's personal staff, and how Leon's perspective changed as he worked with the Senator after I had moved off, first into the vice presidential and then the presidential campaign, and then left the staff, and ultimately when he became the administrative assistant. And that's worth looking at, both in terms of the staff relationships and the working relationships, and Senator Muskie and how he preferred to function.

But through that period I think one cannot understand a lot of the work that Senator Muskie did and the way legislation evolved, without taking a close look at the way the staff functioned and who was responsible. And anyone who looks at the Muskie Archives and the original papers needs to look carefully at marginal notations on memoranda and documents to see who was signing off on the legislation, who was making notes for Senator Muskie on legislation, and what the flow of requests to staff and the flow of information from staff was. Because they played, the staff members played a very important role in informing him and in carrying out his wishes with, both with committees and on the legislation, and in relationship to people back in the state.

Another issue of relationships, of course, is the relationship between the Senator and the Johnson administration, with the president personally and with the Johnson administration, and the relationship between the Muskie office and the executive branch during this period.

I think we've talked before about Senator Muskie and his arrival in the Senate and his clashes with Lyndon Johnson. By the early to mid 1960s, he had become a very important member of the Senate in key areas of interest to the Johnson administration as well as to the country: the environment, public works developments, the intergovernmental relations. As the number of federal programs expanded under the Great Society, those relationships with the states, how the money was to flow, who was to control the money as it flowed into the states, and how much control the federal government would have under those mandates, all of those issues were being addressed by the Subcommittee on Intergovernmental Relations, and, of course, through the Banking and Currency Committee, particularly the housing and urban development work.

We were deeply involved in the work of the Senate and the concerns of the administration with urban blight, and the clashes that grew out of the Civil Rights movement and the results of, long term results, of slavery and discrimination and racial bias. And increasingly during this period, we were working with members of the administration in different departments and playing a significant role in many cases in shaping not only legislation after it arrived in the Senate, but also before the administration submitted proposals to the Senate. And those relationships need to be examined in some detail.

The juggling also involved trade offs in terms of Maine interests. I think I have mentioned before, the fact that one of the prices the Johnson administration paid for Senator Muskie's management, and successful management, of the Model Cities legislation was the addition of Portland to the list of cities that would be eligible for Model Cities grants, and Lewiston ultimately, the expansion of that program. And that was a direct result of the Senator's concerns with what was happening in Maine and how Maine and Maine communities would benefit from federal programs. And we spent considerable amount of time on shepherding the Portland proposal, and later the Lewiston proposal, through the Department of Housing and Urban Development for the grant monies that made possible the Portland Model Cities program. Which, I might add is, from my point of view, one of the most significant federal investments that's been made in Maine in a long time, if one looks at the consequences of that investment and the people who were influenced by the Portland Model Cities program.

The other areas where we played a significant role were, one, the application of the Area Redevelopment Act and related legislation, plus the Defense Department legislation affecting the closing of bases, what we were able to do with both the closing of the air base at Presque Isle and the Dow Air Force Base in Bangor. And the key people in that work included Ross Davis, who had been with the Small Business Administration and then with the, was in the Department of Commerce as an assistant secretary, Department of Commerce.

And Ross was a long time friend of Elizabeth Donahue, who had been an assistant to Congressman Frank Coffin. Libby, as she was known, was from Portland. Her mother was the first woman postmistress in Portland [Maine], the city of Portland post office. And the Lafayette Hotel, now the Lafayette House, was built by her father, who was a big builder. And Helen Donahue, Mrs. Donahue, was a power in the Democratic party in the 1930s, and then was named postmistress. So Libby went to Washington, was active in Americans for Democratic Action, got involved in the Frank Coffin campaigns and worked for Frank as a legislative assistant. And among her friends was Ross Davis, whom we got to know, and Ross was extremely helpful in terms of matters involving small business legislation and the Department of Commerce, and ultimately the conversion of Dow Air Force Base into Bangor International Airport and the whole series of community uses of the property that had been part of the air base. The University of Maine System offices, now located in what had been military housing on the base, the Maine Public Broadcasting's original state university broadcasting system on that property, the Bangor Community College, the city's nursing home and other institutions, and now economic industrial development at the airport. Similar developments took place at Presque Isle.

And Senator Muskie took the position on base closings that if a base was no longer needed for military purposes exclusively, then it ought to be closed, but the federal government had a responsibility to assist in the conversion so that the community was either benefitted by the closing or suffered the least harm possible. And his, his success in supporting the administration and in providing leadership, legislative leadership, for the administration in areas like the environment, Model Cities, etcetera, made it possible to be very effective in working with different departments in the administration. And the tie-in between legislative work and case work made it possible for the staff, a small staff, to work very effectively, I think, with the administration.

Our other focuses in Maine on top of the routine matters, if you will, of agriculture, the Farmers Home Administration, etc., were on the upper St. John and Passamaquoddy projects that led ultimately to the proposals for the Dickey-Lincoln School Dam and combined with a Passamaquoddy proposal. And that, although the power projects never went through, one of the side effects of that effort was the creation of the Allagash Wilderness Waterway which we protected in two ways. One was to advance the Dickey-Lincoln School project which had minimal flooding in the Allagash River to a point below Twin Brook Rapids, and the agreement with the federal government to create a state owned and protected wilderness waterway. And that, too, was a consequence of the close working relationship between Senator Muskie and the Johnson administration. We were able to convince the Department of the Interior to bend its rather rigid rules on how control would be exerted, and to provide fifty percent of the cost of acquisition and initial stabilization of the wilderness waterway.

The other less successful effort that I remember from this period was the sugar beet factory. And that represented a very strong effort to benefit the farmers in Aroostook County by getting diversification of the crop and to take advantage of federal laws providing subsidies for sugar beet production. It came a cropper in the end for a couple of reasons: one, I believe, was that the agricultural research specialists in the University of Maine and at the agriculture research station in Aroostook county were very enthusiastic about the prospects of a new crop, and they allowed their enthusiasm and their interest to divert them from exercising really strong scientific discipline in interpreting the results of their growth trials.

And as a consequence, we did not know as much as we should have known about the difficulties of growing sugar beets, not only in the Maine climate but in the Maine soil. The number of rocks in the soil in Aroostook County meant that you could not have the deep roots and untangled roots that were possible in the more sandy soil of the west, in the irrigated areas. And the lack of certain water supply, because we don't use irrigation in Maine as much, meant that you couldn't have as consistent a crop. So we had results known as sprangled roots, that's s-p-r-a-n-g-l-e-d roots that were caused by the rocks that got in the way of the roots as they grew, and that was not as apparent early on as it should have been before the major investments were made in the sugar beet plant.

And the other problem was that Freddy Vahlsing, V-A-H-L-S-I-N-G, the entrepreneur who was

central to the project, was in many ways a wonderful person. But he was also determined to do things his way and cut corners and alienated the farmers by his handling of their bills, etcetera, and alienated the bureaucrats he had to deal with, including those in the environmental protection agencies as well as the agriculture department folks. And as a result, the project came crashing down ultimately, sadly, and it meant that Aroostook did not get the kind of diversity that it was looking for at the time.

But it involved major investment of Senator Muskie's time early on. I remember he and I went to Colorado for a pollution control hearing and while there met the head of the Great Western sugar beet company and some of his people, and went to look at one of their sugar beet refineries and some of their growing areas, and talked to them about the possibility of coming into Maine and being a major player there. And those kinds of negotiations were part of our effort to promote it. Ultimately George Mitchell played a substantial role working with Freddy Vahlsing and actually became his lawyer. But all of those efforts came to naught because the fundamentals weren't there.

And we were struggling during that period because there were growing demands on Senator Muskie on the national level, a couple of kinds of demands. Well, three kinds of demands. One was the demand for leadership in the significant areas of housing and urban development, environmental protection, and the intergovernmental relations work. The second demand was for leadership and response on the Vietnam War, which was an increasing thorn in everyone's side. And finally, the interest in him as a potential presidential candidate.

Now, one of the items I had not talked about is a Government Operations Committee. I was going to say project, it was not really a project, it was a drawn out incident involving an investigation by the Permanent Investigations Subcommittee of the Government Operations Committee of what was known as TFX. This was a dispute stemming from the proposal to develop aircraft, both fighters and bombers, that could take off slowly, could fly at supersonic speeds, and could also cruise at subsonic speeds easily. And to deal with the technical demands of those kinds of performance, they devised swing wings, that is wings that mechanically swung in close to the fuselage and had very little area for use at supersonic speeds, and swung out to present very large wing areas for subsonic flight and, take off, landing and subsonic flight. The Defense Department had put these out for competitive proposals and the two leading candidates were General Dynamics and Boeing, and General Dynamics and its allies were based in St. Louis and Boeing, of course, in Seattle.

The chairman of the Government Operations Committee and chairman of the subcommittee on investigations was John McClellan of Arkansas who was no friend of Lyndon Johnson or the, Robert McNamara of the Defense Department. He was a very ultra conservative southerner, and anti-civil rights. And the other person who was key in this, on the Government Operations Committee, was Senator Henry A.Scoop@ Jackson of Washington, sometimes referred to as the senator from Boeing. And Boeing lost in the contest, and the Defense Department announced that it would go with General Dynamics. And the designation of the plane was TFX; ultimately it was the F111. And the Defense Department was faced with an investigation, because of accusations that there was all sorts of hanky panky going on in awarding the contract and not

giving it to Boeing. The Defense Department and the Johnson administration had no one on the committee to act for them and to see that they got a fair hearing, and so they came to Senator Muskie and asked him if he would become, in effect, their defense counsel on the committee.

And that drew his administrative assistant into the picture, and I became, because if he agreed to do it he would have to do it himself and his own staff would have to staff the work, because they couldn't trust anybody on the subcommittee. So I ended up being the research analyst, if you will, on TFX. David McGiffert was counsel to Robert McNamara. David had and has a home on Mt. Desert Island and had close ties to Maine, so he and I and a few others worked together. And I learned more about the TFX than I ever wanted to know about any airplane, and we spent months dealing with top secret military information working on that investigation. Ultimately the administration got what amounted to a clean bill of health, and although the plane wasn't a hundred percent successful I guess it provided a transition to the next generation of planes, and we gained a lot in terms of credibility within the Johnson administration, which was useful.

AL: So successful in -

DN: Successful in that respect. Part of my history as being a defense analyst - ha-ha.

AL: Well, great, Don. I think we should probably stop here for today, then we'll pick up again soon.

End of Interview