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Parker, Richard Barron oral history interview

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Interview with Richard Parker by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Parker, Richard Barron

Interviewer

Nicoll, Don

Date

April 18, 2019

Place

Falmouth, Maine

ID Number

MOH 452

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Biographical Note

Born in 1940 in Houston, Texas, and raised in Long Island, New York, Richard Barron Parker graduated from Haverford College in 1962, then completed a Master's at Brown University, a Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Chicago, and a J.D. at Harvard Law School. After a few years practicing law in Boston and teaching at Rutgers University Law School (1971-1982), he spent most of his professional life in Japan: beginning in 1983 by teaching as a Fulbright scholar at Tohoku University in Sendai, at Osaka University, and then for eighteen years at Hiroshima Shudo University. He felt strongly attached to the Japanese aesthetic, and taking every opportunity to engage in Japanese life, he became a fan of Japanese food and drink, Japanese gardens and baths, karaoke, and especially of Chiyonofuki, the star sumo wrestler. After retiring to Maine in 2008, he joined the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Southern Maine to continue teaching classes on Japan and on American elections and politics. Parker died in 2021 in Portland, Maine.

Scope and Content

Interview includes discussions of: 1960 Democratic National Convention; 1968 Democratic National Convention; meeting Ed Muskie; involvement in student politics; 1960s unrest.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: It is Thursday, April 18, 2019. This is Don Nicoll recording an interview with Richard Barrington and this is for the Muskie oral history project. We are at the home of Richard and Patricia Parker, 12 Merrill Road, Falmouth, Maine. Richard could you tell us first your name and then your particular biography.

Richard Parker: Ok my name is Richard Barron, not Barrington, Barron Parker. I was born on October 13, 1940 in Houston, Texas, actually, where my father was temporarily stationed as a lawyer for Shell Oil. When I was one years old, we moved to New York, and during the war we lived in an apartment in Queens and in 1948 my parents moved out to Baldwin, Long Island, on the south shore of Long Island. I went to Baldwin High School, a public high school, and then to Haverford College. I met Senator Muskie between my sophomore and junior year of college when I hitchhiked out to Los Angeles and went to the Democratic National Convention.

DN: Okay. And when did you meet Senator Muskie?

RP: Well for the first time I had never heard of him, and when I got to Los Angeles I checked into a skid row hotel and I wanted to go to the convention and almost all of the

convention, all of the candidates headquarters and all of the apparatus of the convention were concentrated in the Biltmore Hotel. So I went to the Biltmore and I went to the motor pool and they said "Oh are you available right now?" And I gave them a short bio and showed them my driver's license and they just gave me a large Pontiac, with Democratic National Convention on the side, and asked me to take [California] Attorney General Stanley Mosk to the racetrack at Hollywood Park. And I did that and they said well that was great when I got back, and I'd done it all very well so they said could you come in tomorrow and be the chauffeur for Senator Muskie of Maine? Whom I'd never heard of. At that point he was elected senator in 1958, he'd been the governor. And so I went in the next morning and I actually took the car home at night to the skid row hotel and that's where I took it every night. And then the next day I went in and met Senator Muskie and his party for the first time.

DN: Had you any impression of Senator Muskie before you met him?

RP: Not at all.

DN: So this was [laughing, and unclear word]

RP: Absolutely. Most of the drivers were political science majors from the University of Southern California. And you know in those days there was essentially no security anywhere. I mean, if you didn't look like a bum you could go into the Biltmore Hotel and you could go anywhere, you could meet any candidate, there was really no security at all. And so they assigned me to him, and I wouldn't have known—if they'd assigned me to some senator from Alabama or Florida, I probably wouldn't have known that person either.

DN: What was your impression of him when you met him?

RP: I don't have a strong impression. I was with him and his party for the whole week, and he was a very nice person, kind person, actually he gave me, I think on the second day, a set of tickets to the convention. So I not only drove him to the convention but I was able to go myself. I have some stories to tell about that week, but that's more detailed, I think.

DN: How did that group interact?

RP: Well, I was trying to remember the names of the people, and I couldn't. There was Senator Muskie, there was the state chairman of Maine, Democratic state chairman and his wife, and I don't remember their names. And I think there were no more than three or at most four other people from Maine. I don't think his wife was with him.

DN: And ...

RP: And they took me out with them to dinner every night. It was very nice, they sort of adopted me, as a group.

DN: Were they high-powered people?

RP: No. [both laughing] In fact, in a story I can tell later my impression was that they were really quite shocked at some of the things they saw in Los Angeles. They were very...it seemed to me they were sort of like country people in the big city. Now I should say, myself, that I had never been to California myself, and to Los Angeles. But on the way I had stopped in San Francisco and so forth, and I had grown up in and around New York City. But they really did strike me not as bumpkins at all, but as sort of shocked by things people said and did.

DN: Did they incorporate you in the conversation?

RP: Yes, pretty much. I mean, I was very much a junior person. What was interesting is they didn't treat me like a servant, I was really treated as sort of one of the party. In that sense it was very, very unusual. Some of the other drivers that I managed to talk to said it was awful, they didn't get into the convention, they were sort of treated like servants. But Muskie was just not that way at all. I was sort of adopted in as a junior apprentice of the group.

DN: Did they have any discussions about the convention and the issues before the convention?

RP: Yes. I mean, I don't know how much to tell you about the convention itself. As you remember, Kennedy—the major candidates were Kennedy, Humphrey, Symington, Stevenson, Lyndon Johnson—and Muskie was a strong Kennedy supporter, and it was a very, very close question to whether or not Kennedy was going to get the nomination on the first ballot. And in fact, when the voting finished he only got 52 percent of the vote, just barely enough to get the nomination. Muskie was a strong Kennedy supporter, but in their, I think, motel room—I'm not really, motel or hotel, but for some reason I was in there—they had a lot of printed posters of Muskie for VP, and they had printed them all up, because the thought was that if Kennedy didn't make it, that possibly a New England Catholic would be a logical person to be a vice presidential nominee. Now of course that didn't happen, in fact Kennedy made it in a politically very famous deal. Johnson, who was by far his major competitor, was offered the vice presidency.

DN: Did you have any opportunities to talk with him separate from the group?

RP: No, I don't think so. It's not that they were, that there was a lot of high-powered discussion. They themselves, I think, they're representatives from a small state, and I think they were solidly in the Kennedy camp. There wasn't much, at least there wasn't much discussion that I remember.

I myself was fairly, I mean I had participated—I was an Adlai Stevenson supporter, so there was some discussion about that. And I had worked—my first political campaign was 1956 when I was still in high school, and had worked for Stevenson. I remember a

torchlight parade I'd been in, and I still had this kind of sentimental attachment to Stevenson. When he showed up at the convention he got a great big hand, but even people that liked him very much, he'd lost twice in two landslides to Eisenhower and I think there was a sense that he really wasn't going to be the nominee. People applauded him, and sort of thanked him, but I think he was never a real possibility.

DN: I realize you were in high school for the '56 campaign, but now, four years older, did the 1960 convention, and particularly your experience with the Maine delegation and Senator Muskie, change your perspective on politics at all?

RP: I don't think so. We exchanged... I mean, I wasn't a very political person at the time, although actually in the event—the actual election—when I went back to college in my junior year I was involved in radio debates on the college radio station arguing for Kennedy. But I don't think at that point I was a political junkie of any sort. I went on to graduate school in philosophy, so I wasn't at that point drawn in to politics.

DN: Did you get a sense, looking beyond the convention itself, of issues that were on Senator Muskie's mind?

RP: No, I really didn't. I think, this was very early in his career. I know you're very acquainted with his career in Maine, but I think the answer has to be no. The things that Muskie himself later became very involved with, like clean air and clean water, I'm not even sure he was that strong at that point, or that clear. I don't think... We're now in the Eisenhower years, remember, and there isn't the sense of a highly active Democratic government. Kennedy came in sort of promising big change. We're the first generation born in the 20th century, and so forth, but it wasn't quite clear what was going to happen. Eisenhower, if he'd run or allowed to run by the 22nd Amendment, he would have been easily reelected. And as it was, even running against Richard Nixon, Kennedy barely made it.

DN: Coming out of that convention... Well, first of all, let me back up. Do you have any vivid memories from the few days with the Senator?

RP: Yeah, I have a couple. [laughing] I don't know how relevant politically this was. We went out to various restaurants, and they just took me out, they treated me to dinner during the week of the convention. And one night near the end of the convention, we went to the Captain's Table, which was a big seafood restaurant that specialized in lobster. And they had invited the Senator and his party to dinner and they were going to take pictures and it was the kind of thing where they could put something on the wall, and "Where does the senator from Maine go when he comes to Los Angeles? He goes to have lobster at the Captain's Table." What was interesting is that Muskie did his normal thing, hypnotizing the lobster. That's where I learned for the first time to hypnotize a lobster. And at the end of the dinner we must have been, our party of six or seven, the only, or must have been the last party in the restaurant. And the staff person who was minding the store at that point brought the bill, and Muskie said "I thought this dinner was complimentary." The pictures had been taken, the pictures of Muskie and so forth with

the hypnotized lobster. And the man in charge didn't know anything about that arrangement and things got a little tense. I remember Muskie saying to me, "Dick, take the women outside." And so I, with the women in the party, I think there were three of them, we went out to the cars and waited. And after about ten minutes the guys came out, I think it was Muskie and the state chairman and at least one other person, came out looking kind of downcast, and they had paid for dinner. But the next day I learned that the owner of the Captain's Table said it was just a big mistake and they weren't charged for the dinner. But that really stuck in my mind.

Another occasion that I remember is, we were in—I don't know quite how we got there or why we were there—but it was the office of a major savings and loan association, with the president of a major savings and loan association. And he was—we were in his office, which was huge, just huge, I had never seen an office that big—and it featured a huge boomerang desk. This guy was unbelievably kind of crude, and there was a big turntable at the center of the boomerang, and he was making jokes about how he could look at the secretaries breasts when they bent over to pick up papers. And then, as a finale, he shot his cuffs and he had cufflinks with his initials and he said "Just so I don't forget my name." And Muskie I think, and the other two guys, were incredulous. I don't think they had ever encountered—you could see it—they were just amazed that this guy was so crude. Sort of Trump sixty years ahead of his time! And they talked about it after we went out to the car, they just said "Oh, I just can't believe it." And that stuck in my mind.

DN: Did you have any chances after that experience in Los Angeles to see Senator Muskie, or...?

RP: No, but we exchanged Christmas cards for a couple of years. And I think if I'd just kept sending him cards he would have sent responses, but I graduated and I went to Brown University where I got an MA in Philosophy then transferred to the University of Chicago, where I got a PhD in Philosophy, and was just totally in the academic world. So, no, I never pursued any kind of further connection with him.

DN: Did his subsequent career surprise you or did you follow his career at all?

RP: Yeah, I was aware enough in politics, and then we got in to the Vietnam War, and I still remember I was finishing my dissertation, actually, in early 1968 when Johnson said he wasn't going to run, when he decided not to run for president again. And I was very much caught up in the anti-war movement. I demonstrated a bit at Chicago, and after my PhD in Philosophy I went to Harvard Law School because I sort of worked through philosophy, from epistemology and then ethics and political philosophy, and I realized that I didn't know anything about how countries, or about how the United States actually worked. And so then I went to law school, and at that point I'd been so long out of touch with Senator Muskie I didn't try to look him up. But I did follow his career, and in '72, I think, when he was a serious candidate, I remember that I think it was... Was that '72, when he was tricked and cried in New Hampshire, or was that '68? Do you remember?

DN: Senator Muskie ran for the presidential nomination for the 1972 campaign.

RP: Okay, yes, so at that point I was very aware of him, as was everybody, I think. I was a McGovern person, I thought McGovern was going to win, which shows you how deeply I was into an academic bubble. But I knew him, I admired him, I thought he was a very good man, but I didn't seek at any point to hook up with him again. Because I was in academia pretty much totally. I graduated from Harvard Law School in 1971 and then stayed an extra year to work with Professor Paul Freund as his clerk. It was that '71/'72 that you had the campaign, and then I went to Rutgers Law School to teach, so there wasn't any point where I was at loose ends, and of course Muskie wasn't nominated because of Nixon's dirty tricks. So I just never hooked up with him again. In some ways I wouldn't have assumed simply because I was a chauffeur at the 1960 campaign... [laughs] I think he might have remembered my name, he was good that way, but I had no real career reason or whatever to hook up with him.

DN: Do you have any other observations, or how your politics was influenced by that experience?

RP: Well, a lot of interesting things happened in Los Angeles along with that. I met the comedian Mort Sahl, I met Jayne Mansfield, as a result of being around the convention. I'd always been a lifelong Democrat, and actually in 1968 I was still in Chicago and I was in the demonstrations at the 1968 convention. I remember seeing, there's the very famous picture...who was the French author?...of everybody piled up on the horse in the park there by Chicago. [Referring to the General John Logan statue in Grant Park.] And I was in two of those demonstrations. I wasn't at the one in front of the Hilton where the police essentially rioted. But I was at that convention. I do remember being a part of one demonstration where we walked down toward the convention center, which was south of the center of the city, and there was a line of soldiers about our age, and there were sawhorses and a little barbed wire and they all had guns. They were standing very—they were very interested in us because we were all the same age—and I remember them being much less threatening than the Chicago police. You really had the sense they weren't all of a sudden going to come at you, and they were just doing their jobs and they were the same age as we were. There was no bad feeling, actually between the crowd and the troops, but they were absolutely stopping them from getting any closer to the convention center. And then when I was at Harvard Law School I participated in demonstrations because of the Cambodian incursion and the bombing. And at Harvard Law School I was a member of a very notorious class of 1971, where we actually got the Law School to postpone all of their first-year examinations until the fall, which was almost unheard of in the law school culture at the time. I remember a very interesting session with Dean Derek Bok, he was the Law School Dean at that point. I think one reason he was made president of the University after that is that he handled us so well, he really handled the law students very well. But that was a really tempestuous time.

DN: In the midst of that turmoil at the 1968 convention, did you watch any of it on television?

RP: Yeah. We didn't have a television. You know, I was a graduate student in philosophy! [laughs] I had nothing! Finally, I think many years later when I was teaching at Rutgers and living in Massachusetts, my father-in-law bought us a little portable 8-square-inch screen, but it was only when our daughter, who was born in 1972, when our daughter got to kind of television age that we got a normal television set. I mean, people didn't watch television in those days. Serious people didn't watch television.

DN: Did you see or hear Senator Muskie's acceptance speech at the '68 convention?

RP: I don't think so, and I think I would have remembered if I had.

DN: Any other observations on Senator Muskie?

RP: No, I think he was a good and honorable man, a great man I think, and I think his major contribution—he certainly would have been a better president than I think either Nixon or McGovern—I wish we had more people like him. We had George Mitchell here in Maine, we've had people who are good, like Angus King. But after George Mitchell, I think he's the most impressive Maine politician I know of. And certainly, nationally he's one of the best people of the last fifty years. But the fact that I'd actually met him and knew him, I don't think it gave me any more insight than other people had. No secrets were revealed. The political ambition, which I think was well placed, of all of the placards ready to go in case Kennedy didn't make the nomination, I think that's normal political ambition. I wasn't shocked at the time, and it seemed to me that he was clearly thinking ahead. But it didn't happen, and it's actually too bad. Although he was Secretary of State, and I think he did very good service to the country. I've always thought well of him.

DN: Thank you very much.

End of interview.