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Bradstreet, Clair S. oral history interview

Greg Beam

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Interview with Clair S. Bradstreet by Greg Beam

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Bradstreet, Clair S.

Interviewer

Beam, Greg

Date

August 3, 2000

Place

Palermo, Maine

ID Number

MOH 213

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Biographical Note

Clair Samuel Bradstreet was born on September 28, 1915 and raised in the town of Albion, a small farming community in central Maine. His parents were farmers, as were three generations before. He became a farmer also and grew potatoes. Clair was chairman of the town committee at one time and a strong, early Muskie supporter. Clair passed away October 12, 2000.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: farming in Maine; impressions of Muskie; political changes in Maine since the 1950s; Russell family; and Guy Twombly.

Indexed Names

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Transcript

Greg Beam: The date is August 3rd, 2000. This is Greg Beam and I'm here with Clair Bradstreet at his home on North Palermo Road in Palermo, Maine. To begin, could you please state your full name and spell it for the record?

Clair Bradstreet: Clair S. Bradstreet, C-L-A-I-R, S., B-R-A-D-S-T-R-E-E-T.

GB: What does the S stand for?

CB: Samuel.

GB: Samuel, all right. When and where were you born?

CB: Albion.

GB: Albion?

CB: In Albion.

GB: Did you grow up there?

CB: Grew up there.

GB: And what was the Albion community like when you were growing up?

CB: Farming community.

GB: What's that?

CB: Farming community.

GB: Farming community. Were your parents farmers?

CB: Oh yeah, yeah.

GB: Is there a long history of that in your family?

CB: Yup.

GB: How far back does that go?

CB: Farming?

GB: Yeah.

CB: Three generations.

GB: Oh, really, is that when your family came into Maine, three generations ago?

CB: Oh, more than that. Family come into, they come into Maine, I don't know when they come into Maine, early settlers, so.

GB: I see, I see. So how big was the Albion community back then?

CB: Oh my, it started about, probably bigger than it is today. I imagine fifteen, two thousand people maybe, might have been more.

GB: And do you recall your parents' political beliefs?

CB: Political beliefs, Christ, I guess they were Democrats.

GB: Is there a Democratic tradition in your family?

CB: Well, it seems to be.

GB: How far back do you think that goes?

CB: Two, one, two, three generations.

GB: Oh, really? Did your parents talk to you a lot about their political beliefs?

CB: No, no.

GB: Just kind of let you form that on your own?

CB: Right.

GB: Opinions on your own? All right, and what kind of things were you interested in when you were a kid growing up in Albion?

CB: (*Unintelligible phrase*), you had to work to get a living.

GB: All right, and you went to school in Albion?

CB: Yup.

GB: At a community school?

CB: Yup.

GB: And how far did you go in school in Albion?

CB: High school graduate.

GB: What did you do after graduating high school?

CB: Farming.

GB: You became a farmer right off the bat?

CB: Yeah.

GB: Have you been a farmer all your life?

CB: Yeah.

GB: So, how has, how has the, have the conditions of farmers changed over the decades in Maine?

CB: Well, they've gone from good to poor, I must say, because there's no money in farming now, not in it.

GB: Was it a pretty big, was it fairly lucrative when you were a farmer?

CB: Yeah.

GB: And you did that for your whole life pretty much?

CB: Yeah.

GB: Whereabouts?

CB: Right in Palermo and Albion.

GB: Oh really, what did you grow?

CB: Potatoes mostly.

GB: Potatoes mostly. And so, tell me: what have been your political beliefs over the years? You've been a Democrat yourself?

CB: Yeah.

GB: All your life pretty much?

CB: All my life.

GB: And do you think being a farmer has influenced your political thoughts?

CB: Well, might be some.

GB: How so?

CB: Well, these grants and all for agriculture is probably done by the Democratic Party.

GB: Oh really, really. And now I know that back a long time ago the Democratic Party was pretty small in Maine.

CB: Right.

GB: Do you remember, do you remember when it kind of took off and started growing?

CB: The middle fifties.

GB: How would you say that happened?

CB: Well, they got some good men started and they got, made Muskie got going there. And got, had some more good men, and they done some work. People got sick of that Republicans, the way they was running the state, and out they go.

GB: What do you think they had problems with? About, you know, the way Republicans were running things?

CB: Oh, Christ, they had an awful record. Republicans were the only ones who did get anything in Augusta.

GB: And did you notice a change when the Democrats kind of came into power, when Ed Muskie was elected?

CB: (*Unintelligible phrase*) change.

GB: Did it help you personally as a farmer?

CB: Oh, I don't know if it helped me personally, but business was a little better.

GB: Oh really, I see, I see. And how do you think that happened? What did the Democratic party do that kind of helped things out, helped business -?

CB: Well, they was one for the little fella instead of the big shot.

GB: I see. And so I imagine you were a pretty big Ed Muskie supporter in his early career.

CB: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

GB: Did you know him at all personally?

CB: Oh well, I knew him.

GB: Oh really?

CB: Yeah.

GB: Did you know him quite well?

CB: Not too well, but.

GB: How did you know him?

CB: Through politics.

GB: Oh really, so you were involved, active in the party?

CB: Yeah.

GB: In what capacity, how were you involved?

CB: I was chairman of a committee in town.

GB: I see, I see, and so you got to meet him as he was running for governor?

CB: Yeah.

GB: And what were your impressions about, of him, when you met him, just you know, personally?

CB: Well, you could see that he knew what he was talking about.

GB: Really.

CB: There was no gift of gab, he knew what he wanted to say and he said it. Didn't make no difference who he stepped on, he was there.

GB: Really, do you think that's how he got elected?

CB: M-hmm.

GB: Because people were impressed with the way he spoke?

CB: Yup, yup.

GB: And I imagine you continued to support him over the years?

CB: Oh sure, yeah.

GB: Did you think that he would, you know, go as far as he did? And remain in politics, and make as many, as much of an impact as he did?

CB: Well, he was a smart man, and he was a good debater. When he was in college he was one of the top class debaters. And he could talk, and they knew him all over this country, yup.

GB: And did you have a lot of contact with him, with Muskie over the years?

CB: Not too much, no.

GB: Oh, really. When did you encounter him?

CB: Oh, at different places, different times, different rallies.

GB: Do any specific ones come to mind that were especially interesting?

CB: No, I don't know that there is, because we had a lot of good Democrats coming along at that time.

GB: Oh really?

CB: Sure.

GB: Who were some of the other good Democrats back then?

CB: Clinton Clauson out of Waterville, he was governor. Frank Coffin, Bill Hathaway, he cleaned out old lady Smith that one year.

GB: What did he do?

CB: He defeated her for senator.

GB: Oh, oh, oh yeah, yeah, Margaret Chase Smith.

CB: That was a big blow to the Republican Party, when Bill Hathaway (*unintelligible word*), yeah.

GB: Now was Clinton Clauson there, active in the party, you know, way back in the fifties, or was he -?

CB: He was, now you let's see, Clinton Clauson was the head of the Internal Revenue Service for Maine. So he had to kind of keep (*unintelligible phrase*) but after he retired he run for governor, and he got elected.

GB: I see, I see. Were you involved with his campaign as well?

CB: Yeah, probably.

GB: And all those others, too? Because I know that Frank Coffin, he ran for governor once, right?

CB: Got beat.

GB: Yeah, yeah. So let me ask you, when Ed Muskie was elected governor and, you know, after a long string of Republican governors, did that surprise you and other Democrats you knew?

CB: Well, maybe it surprised me that he beat some-, got, beat them so much.

GB: So it must have been exciting when he was elected.

CB: Yeah, yeah.

GB: Are there, is Palermo and this area around here, are there a lot of Democrats around here, or is it mostly Republican?

CB: Ought to be more Democrats. Mostly Republican but, God, we carry the town a lots of times because the Democrats carry it, more so than used to.

GB: Did you know, so back when you were supporting Muskie, did you know some Republicans around here who supported him?

CB: Oh, hell yeah, a lot of them.

GB: Why did they tell you that they were kind of crossing the lines of the -?

CB: They got sick of the way the, some things had been done by the Republicans. The

average citizen didn't like it.

GB: Did they, they didn't care for Burt Cross, perhaps, as a governor?

CB: No, no, no, no, no Burt Cross, I don't know, he was a good fellow. Hell, I knew Burt well, but he done some things they didn't like.

GB: Tell me about Burt Cross, what was he like?

CB: Burt was a nice man, nice man, that's all I can say about him. He was a good fellow and I liked him, but I wouldn't vote for him.

GB: I see, I see. Now did, did you over the years, you know, consistently, did you follow Ed Muskie's career?

CB: Well, yeah, yeah.

GB: What would you say, for you, were some of the most important things that he did?

CB: Oh, Lord, I don't know, I couldn't say. A lot of these things that he done is quite a thing for a man from Maine, as small a state as Maine used to be. The positions he held, secretary of the state, that's quite a position for a man from the state of Maine.

GB: I see, all right. Did you have any interest in his environmental legislation?

CB: Well, it was all right. Of course his, got these rivers cleaned up, we'll say he done that. But they needed to be, we know that.

GB: Did he do anything that ever interested you as a farmer, that was relevant to agriculture in Maine?

CB: I don't know if he ever did, I don't know but he might of. But that was a long while ago, fifty years ago, boy.

GB: Do you think, in those fifty years, has the Democratic Party or, you know, the way Democratic politicians act, besides it growing in Maine, has it changed in any other ways?

CB: Oh, I don't know, maybe it's changed into too liberal, getting too liberal.

GB: Oh really, you think it used to be more conservative?

CB: Well yeah, but they've always, they's always a little liberal, but they're getting more and more. Well of course the whole, all the people are getting that way. This younger generation is more liberal than we ever were.

GB: I see, I see. So do you think that Ed Muskie was fairly conservative, would you say?

CB: Yeah, probably he was.

GB: I see. I've heard someone say that Ed Muskie could have run as a Republican with the same politics and been a credible Republican. Do you think that's true?

CB: Probably he could. I don't know.

GB: Let me ask you, do you know the Russell family around Waterville and Sydney, like Clyde Russell and Ted Russell?

CB: Ted ain't living.

GB: Oh really, Ted, yeah. And Clyde was his -?

CB: No, let's see, Clyde was Ted's father.

GB: And how did you know them?

CB: Oh, you know, my sister married Ted.

GB: Oh really.

CB: But of course everybody knew them Russells out there, they were big for cattle business.

GB: Oh really.

CB: Jersey herd of cattle.

GB: I see, I see, were they, they were involved in politics, were they?

CB: Oh yes, Christ yes.

GB: How so, did you see that involvement?

CB: They were mixed right into it.

GB: What kinds of things did they do?

CB: They were farmers.

GB: I see, I see. And so they were just involved, involved in the Democratic Party just as you were? You know, getting involved in the campaigns and so forth?

CB: Yup.

GB: I see, all right. Now, I'm curious about something: What's the ethnic, what was the ethnic makeup of Palermo back in the fifties? Do you recall what the ethnic make up was, if there were any ethnic minorities?

CB: In what?

GB: If there were, if there was perhaps a Franco-American population or an Italian population, or anything like that?

CB: Might have been, very few, there was one or two Italians.

GB: I see, I see. Would you say that the ethnic minorities had a part in helping the Democratic Party grow?

CB: Could of, they could of helped.

GB: Just can't say for sure?

CB: No.

GB: I see, I see. Let me ask you about the, do you know the Twombly family? You knew Guy Twombly I understand?

CB: Yessuh.

GB: Could you tell me about him.

CB: Oh, he was an awful rogue, yeah, an awful Democrat, and he was a big Democrat. But sometimes I didn't know but he done more harm than he did good. (*Unintelligible phrase*).

GB: How's that, why would you say he did more harm than good sometimes?

CB: Well, Christ, he could get some of the Democrats ugly, yeah.

GB: I see, now I hear he was kind of almost prejudiced against Republicans?

CB: Oh, God, yes he was, yeah.

GB: You saw that?

CB: Yeah.

GB: Were there a lot of people like that, were a lot of the old time Democrats like that?

CB: Oh, I suppose there was a lot of them old time Democrats just like that, yeah.

GB: Oh really, oh really. So do you think that was, that was the way most of the Democrats were in the party, that they were kind of really, really didn't like the Republican philosophy?

CB: Well most of them, or some of them.

GB: How did you know Guy Twombly?

CB: Through the Democratic Party, Waldo County.

GB: And what about Phyllis Murphy?

CB: Yeah.

GB: You knew her?

CB: Yessuh.

GB: Was she like that, a real adamant Democrat as well?

CB: Yup, she was a real Democrat.

GB: As strong as Guy Twombly you'd say?

CB: Gosh, no, you couldn't be strong as Guy, but it weren't far behind.

GB: I see, I see. So can you think of any other names of people who were involved in the early Democratic Party?

CB: Oh, let's see, in Belfast down there, Richard Webber, I knew, probably you never heard of him. Oh, we had some good old Democrats, Richard Webber.

GB: Is he still alive?

CB: No. Byron Greenlaw, he's still living.

GB: Byron Greenlaw?

CB: Yeah.

GB: Where is he from?

CB: Belfast.

GB: And what kind of things did he do?

CB: He was a grocery man.

GB: And you knew him through involvements with the party?

CB: Yeah.

GB: I see, I see. So did he know a lot of, a lot of the old candidates and old -?

CB: Yeah, yeah, he was quite a worker.

GB: All right, do you know what sorts of things did he do, or just general kind of volunteering?

CB: General campaigning and (*unintelligible phrase*).

GB: Can you think of anyone else?

CB: No, not right off, no.

GB: I see. So these politicians you knew, you know, Clinton Clauson and Bill Hathaway and Frank Coffin, could you tell me a little bit about them personally, what they were like, what each of them was like?

CB: God, no, not really, no.

GB: You didn't know them very well.

CB: No. No.

GB: All right, well, I'm just about done with my questions. So do you have, is there anything you'd, you know, like to say about Ed Muskie or the Democratic Party, or anyone else you knew that, any remarks you'd like to make?

CB: Let 'em rest, let 'em rest.

GB: All right. Well thank you very much for your time.

CB: Yessuh.

End of Interview