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Cutler, Kay oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

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Interview with Kay Cutler by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Cutler, Kay

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

April 4, 2002

Place

Portland, Maine

ID Number

MOH 334

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Biographical Note

Catherine (Epstein) "Kay" Cutler was born September 19, 1913 in Bangor, Maine. Her father was an immigrant, who came to this country from Eastern Europe at age thirteen. She grew up on Grove Street in Bangor, which was part of the Jewish community. She lived her whole life in Bangor, except during her college years at Wellesley, where she majored in economics. She married Dr. Lawrence Cutler, who was a doctor and member of the Board of Trustees at the University of Maine (Orono), and for whom the Cutler Health Center at the University of Maine, Orono is named. She was actively involved with social service and mental health issues in Maine. She was awarded the University of Maine's Hartman Award in 1986, along with May Sarton and Berenice Abbott. She passed away on February 5, 2003. Her son, Eliot Cutler (MOH 337, 355 and 401), was interviewed three times for this project.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: political awareness and social responsibility in the Depression era; World War II; *Bangor Evening Commercial* and *Bangor Daily Commercial*; Wild Stein Club; Eliot Cutler's political development; Margaret Chase Smith's "Declaration of Conscience"; Ralph Owen Brewster v. Fred Payne; Bangor's Jewish community; Whit and Charlie McAvoy; Ewing/Brown/Cutler/Nicoll camp at Hatcase Pond; and mental health issues in

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Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Kay Cutler on April the 4th, the year 2002, at 640 Ocean Avenue in Portland. Could you start by giving me your full name, and where and when you were born?

Kay Cutler: My full name is Catherine Epstein Cutler. I was born in Bangor, Maine on Essex Street and lived there actually until I was married. I came back to Bangor after WWII and moved to a house about three blocks away and lived there until two years ago, so actually I spent about eighty-six years in Bangor, except for going away to college and working and moves like that. But my addresses were always either Essex Street or Grove Street.

AL: And what is your date of birth?

KC: Oh, September 19, 1913.

AL: And what was it like growing up in Bangor?

KC: I had a perfectly lovely childhood. Two sisters who are younger. I went to public schools in Bangor. I was a compulsive achiever and I did very well in high school and moved on from, under the, well, it was before the Depression really slapped Bangor hard, but I went on to Wellesley College because of the influence of a Latin teacher, actually. I didn't know anything about colleges really. Neither, certainly, did my mother and father, but I went on to Wellesley.

And actually, over a period of seven years, got both a bachelor's and a master's degree in economics. But I wasn't, Bangor was, you know, it was nice and quiet, and I was brought up thinking that everybody who was of good stock was a Republican. I never heard about, Democrats were a class aside, and I believed everything my father told me or I heard or read in the newspapers. And I went off to college as innocent as a babe in the woods.

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

KC: My mother was a housewife, and my father was an immigrant who came to this country when he was thirteen years old and, because he had older brothers who were already established in Bangor, and they came from west of Russia, eastern Europe. And I think he was considerably, well for those days, considerably older than my mother. I think he came here in the late 1880s, and he was in the, you know, he did the routine peddler to horse drawn vehicle to store to, and he was a wholesale jobber of dry goods. And then when that business collapsed he went into business with a nephew selling confectionary and groceries, also as a wholesaler, in mostly the counties north of, and east and west of Bangor. And that was who they were.

AL: Your teacher, how did your teacher, your Latin teacher, influence you in going to college? Did the teacher sort of guide you?

KC: She had gone to Wellesley, and she was a dear little old lady, I thought she was old of course, and little, she seemed so to me. But anyway, she just started talking colleges and told me about this college and I, so I picked up other information about women's colleges. And, of course, when the opportunity to choose came, I chose on the basis of: I knew her and she was okay.

AL: So you majored in economics, and where did you meet your husband?

KC: I met my husband, well, when I came home for a vacation he had just started practicing medicine in Bangor. He came from Old Town, which was only twelve miles away, but I never knew him. And I met him one night when he was going out on a date with my sister. I didn't get to, we didn't get to see each other for a few years later. And she ended up marrying his brother, and I married him.

AL: That's neat. So this was after college that you knew, yeah.

KC: Oh yeah, this was actually about a year and a half, maybe two years before WWII, 1939. And everybody that I knew, almost, in college in the middle thirties, it was the best boom period for people to be interested in economics because they all, everybody wanted to know what had happened.

AL: During the Depression?

KC: Yeah. But, of course we never found out, but at least we tried to understand.

AL: Do you have recollections of things during the Depression, memories of what it was like

for people? Did you see it?

KC: Yes. I'm sure I was protected from the worst, but it certainly was all around us. The Depression was awful, it was that picture [*she points to a picture on the wall*]. I think I bought that Thomas, oh, names go out of my head, but anyway, lithograph to show, when my kids were little, because it was so impossible to describe the horrors of the Depression. Well, anyway, that's a different subject.

AL: Now, at what point did you start feeling you had an interest or opinions about politics, then?

KC: Well, I told you, when I went to Wellesley I was about as empty-headed as any character seventeen or eighteen years old could be, innocent as a babe. When I got to college, it seems whole worlds were opened up. I heard about labor unions, I never heard about labor unions in Bangor. I heard about Democrats, I heard, you know, about all these things that had, it was just like opening floods of information. And so, when I graduated from college, my younger sister, we always thought was so entertaining, we didn't know anything. She, today I would have known, I hope, that she has bi-polar, you know, whatever they call it, manic depressive disease.

And by the time we were married, well, after we went, Lawrence went into the Army and was activated a year and, less than two years after we were married. And then he was gone, he was in the Army for five years and was overseas for three-plus years and, when I worked in Washington. And I, when everybody else in the forties were learning about what stress and (*sounds like: storrenbrung* German word?) and horror were doing to soldiers and everybody else, there was a general increase of, and I realized then that we'd really missed it, but what would we have done had we known? Where would we have gone? And when I went back to Bangor an old friend named Carol Butler Means, Carol Lord Means, had been active in the community and she said, "You have to do something, so you might start on the board of the family and childcare services." And from then on it was just easy. And I was really, you know, as I look back on it, I really tried so hard to improve mental health services from, I was reminded last week when John Romanyshyn's obituary was in the Portland paper, and he was a professor at the university, and he and Al Dietrich, a social worker, and I used to hound the people in Augusta to separate mental health from prisons. And anyway, it was just getting, trying to get services to people who needed them. And most of the time I think we didn't do anything but run in circles, but -

AL: They're tough issues.

KC: They're tough issues and hard to glamorize.

AL: Your husband was involved with the University of Maine, too, wasn't he?

KC: Yeah.

AL: In what capacity?

KC: Well, as I said, when we came back to Bangor and had these sort of mentors who had been in Bangor all during the war, and one of them was a doctor named Henry Knowlton who was a member of the council, the city council, one of the few practicing doctors in the, during WWII because nobody, most doctors were in the Army. And I can still remember Henry Knowlton coming in to our house and saying to Lawrence, "Now look, you can't be just like everybody else, you have to do something for the community as well as practice medicine." Well, it made a big impression, and he said, "What do you want to do? I'll fix it for you." So Lawrence said, "Well, I suppose we would be, I'd be interested in education." So Henry Knowlton said, "We'll put you on the school board." That was when the council appointed people to the school board. And we had no children, but anyway, he got on the school board and after a couple of sessions he'd really been hooked. So at that point I think he told a friend of ours, Frank Hussey, who was a big Democrat from the county -

AL: Frank Hussey?

KC: Yeah, and he said, "I'd like to be on the university board of trustees." And so Frank went to Ed Muskie and he was on the university board of trustees for twenty years I think.

AL: Did Larry, Lawrence, did he know Ed Muskie at that point?

KC: I don't think so, but he got to know him. Those were the days of the *Bangor Daily Commercial*, which was a liberal afternoon newspaper that was published by a couple of good friends of ours. Anyway -

AL: Who did publish the *Bangor Commercial*?

KC: James Ewing and Russell Peters. James Ewing just died in January.

AL: Yes, we interviewed him a couple years ago. And the *Bangor Commercial*, was that a rival of the *Bangor Daily News*?

KC: It tried to be.

AL: It tried to be.

KC: But the *Bangor Daily News* won out.

AL: Were there any particularly strong voices coming from the *Bangor Daily News* on the Republican side? Or was there a particular person who was really always out there with his opinion?

KC: Oh yes, the editor. I can't remember what his name was. O'Connell or somebody like that. He was always out there, and of course they really throttled the *Commercial*. The next generation people who ran the *Bangor Daily News* has really done much more, well, they've been the only game in town, and they've really improved a lot from the previous two generations. But anyway, it was a big loss when the *Commercial* folded, in 1953 I think.

AL: So how early was it that you and your husband first met Muskie?

KC: Oh, I'm sure Lawrence knew him a lot, a long time before I did. I can't remember when I got to know him.

AL: I guess I'm thinking of whether you can remember if it was before he became governor or after?

KC: I think it probably was after when I did, yeah.

AL: Do you recall any of the issues that your husband dealt with while on the board at University of Maine?

KC: Yeah, issues that interested me probably more than him. I remember the fracas about the Wild Stein Club, when he and James Sampson, chair person and vice chair, and one of the things I remember about that was every Sunday that minister, whose name I forget, from the Baptist church out on Broadway, got on the TV and Lawrence and I used to listen to him scream about how Lawrence Cutler was teaching teachers to teach your children how to be homosexuals.

AL: You're kidding.

KC: Oh no, it was every week. And the post office had these big canvas mail bags, and they'd bring two or three up and dump them on the porch, and they were all the same letters written by irate parishioners around about how this was, this free speech for the Wild Stein Club was going to teach your children how to become homosexuals. It's incredible how stupid people are. And you read the paper today, and the same kind of stupidity. No progress.

AL: Do you recall how your son Eliot came to go, become an intern, was it an intern in Muskie's office, or was it right on the staff?

KC: Do you want to know from the very beginning?

AL: Yeah.

KC: Eliot, Eliot was too big, too heavy, he had acne, he was not a very, he wasn't a pretty charming child. And I remember that when other kids were out doing things, during the McCarthy hearings, when he was just a little kid, he sat in front of the TV and listened to all those people declare their rights under Article 5 or whatever it is of the Constitution, declared their right not to incriminate themselves. And we went to a Boy Scout meeting one night, I remember, and Eliot wished to participate in the adult discussion. I think he was then about maybe eight or nine or something, he must have been, because he never was an active Boy Scout. Anyway, he insisted on speaking up, and I finally took him out and took him home and planted him with his father who was gentler than I. And I thought, jeepers, how are you going to control this. But at any rate, he developed an interest in government and as he grew up he kept talking about how he was going to be governor of Maine someday. Anyway, it was all there.

And then when he went to prep school, one summer he got some kind of an intern, some kind of a student program in government that was done in St. Louis, and he spent I think it was six weeks in St. Louis studying government. And he was, and did it through college. And anyway, I think he was just, it was just something that excited him. When he was in the first grade was when Stevenson was running for president, and we were all so gung ho for Stevenson. And I think he thought if we were that encouraged, that excited about Adlai Stevenson, he must be the only person to vote for. And when Adlai Stevenson lost, we lost face. It was so awful, but I remember he came home from school the next day and he said, "Miss Hoolihan voted for Stevenson, too, and she lost." And I could have hugged Miss Hoolihan because I thought she did us a big favor. She restored our son's faith in us, because the teacher said it was okay. Anyway, he I think was, it was always something he just wanted to do, to participate in somehow. I don't remember how he got the job with Don Nicoll and Muskie's office, but anyway he went straight from college and actually took a year off from going to law school. And I don't think he ever went to law school, I think he just dropped in occasionally, but anyway, he was, it was much more important to work for Ed Muskie. I think Ed Muskie and Don Nicoll, or Don Nicoll and Ed Muskie, really created this persona.

AL: Did you recall, or were focusing yet on, when you were talking about the McCarthy hearings, and do you recall Margaret Chase Smith's declaration of conscience?

KC: I certainly do.

AL: What are your recollections of that, how did you feel about it?

KC: I thought it was the most spectacular performance. I was just so pleased and so excited, because ordinarily I would, I was not one of Margaret Chase Smith's great admirers, I thought she was, you know, she got there by accident. She was a Republican, she wasn't doing anything very much, and I thought this was the most exciting thing. I was just, and I've always, I've never really thought that she was any kind of great creative law maker, but that, she could do no harm after that. I thought that was really, and I don't care how it happened or who pushed her, but she did it, and I thought that was wonderful. And I still do. It was the kind of thing all of us I think wished we were in a position to do, and would have done it if we could.

AL: We hope so. Do you remember the campaign between Fred Payne and Ralph Owen Brewster?

KC: Oh yes, I certainly do.

AL: Tell me about it.

KC: That was the *Bangor Evening Commercial's* shining hour, or one of them. They were really close to the skids when that happened, and they really, well they did it I think. And actually, the newspaper wasn't making that much money, they weren't making any money as a matter of fact, they were losing money, as Jim probably told you. But his mother-in-law had inherited some money from a great uncle or somebody who was a bishop or something in the, I

can't remember these details, in the Boston Episcopal hierarchy. And she was, this was her money, I remember, and she encouraged them to do it. And I so clearly remember Mrs. Doyne saying after it was all over, even though it was very costly, don't you think it was worth it? It was a fortune in those days, and she lost it all. But Owen Brewster was out, and Fred Payne, no matter what he was, was it. And they worked so hard, and it was really I think to all of the people at the *Commercial*, for the Ewings, exhibit A of what you could do if you had a newspaper, what the media could really accomplish and how you could influence people's thinking by telling them the facts. Oh, I, that was a big achievement.

AL: What was Ralph Owen Brewster's reputation?

KC: Well, you know, he'd been elected for a long time. But it was the reputation he had with, whatever the scandal was, I forget those details, with American Airlines. He was also accused, and I don't know what the facts were, of being affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan. He married a woman who had money that was made, as the story went, because her father manufactured vanilla extract during Prohibition and people drank lots of vanilla because it was one legal way of getting alcohol, it was not that they baked so much. I don't know, any of these things, but these are the things I recall.

AL: I think I'd better stop today.

KC: Well I think, do I know any more? I don't think I do. What are your other questions?

AL: I was just going to ask a little bit about the Jewish community?

KC: In Bangor?

AL: Yeah, your memories and recollections of some of the traditions, and was it a big community, a small community, things like that? Do you have any thoughts on that?

KC: Oh sure. When I was growing up it was a very socially isolated community, you know, there weren't very And all in all, Bangor's Jewish community never had any problems compared with the Irish Catholics, for example. In Bangor there were riots against the Catholics. I remember all kinds of unpleasant things. But I don't remember, and I don't think there were, any outright demonstrations against the Jewish population. They were tolerated and not bothered. Nobody, by and large, everybody always feels some discrimination, you know, but there was no harmful result of any of this that I remember. And when I was growing up, from a religious point of view, it was an orthodox community. There were several synagogues, they were all orthodox; they just couldn't chat with each other. They came from different places in Europe and they had different traditions.

AL: So you were raised with the Jewish traditions?

KC: Oh yeah. I wasn't raised with any religious training, but you certainly knew who you were. And as a child my playmates were neighborhood children who weren't Jewish, and friends during school, when I got to high school there began to be a difference. There were in those

days fraternities and sororities in the high school, and the Jews were not invited to the non-Jewish fraternities and sororities, so they had their own. And that was the beginning of really social difference. But not, it was nothing that harmed anybody. But our expectations, even through college, were so accepting of that. As long as you don't bother me, the teachers are fair and honest, and we have the same privilege as everybody else, why bother squawking. But, you know, the blacks taught us differently. However, growing up in Bangor was perfectly pleasant. I don't have any recollections of unhappiness because of being Jewish. When I came back to Bangor after the war, I was active in Jewish community council as well as a lot of other things, and interested.

AL: Did you ever work directly on any political campaigns?

KC: I don't think so. I talked a lot, but I didn't work for any.

AL: Did you know the Baldaccis in political circles?

KC: No, I knew them as the people who ran an Italian restaurant.

AL: And Whit McAvoy?

KC: Whit McAvoy.

AL: Yes, can you tell me a little bit about her?

KC: How many people hear this tape?

AL: Well, it will be in the archives for any researcher that's interested.

KC: Well, I don't really care. Whit McAvoy was a very interesting woman. She really, she was bright and intelligent, and she contributed a lot to all of the things she was interested in. But the most interesting thing, and the only irritating thing, about the McAvoy's was that Charlie, who was, you know, a busy surgeon, and he couldn't spend much time on various things that he was really interested in, and he would put her there to report to him, and then she did what he said. And that always irritated the life out of me, because everybody knew it, it was no secret. She went to Democrat caucuses and all kinds of things and came right back and told Charlie, and he told her what to do the next time, and she did it. And she was much too bright for that. And I think

AL: Yeah, you just wanted her to have her own mind.

KC: Well, she was his political other mind and voice. It was, I don't know what she, she may have agreed with everything, but the point was that she did what he said to do. But, and they were active, a real, all my feminism got, how could anybody do this. But they were real contributors together, but they weren't two voices, they were only one.

AL: And how about Madeleine and Stanley Freeman, you must have known them?

KC: Oh, sure. The difference is that Madeleine had I think, she had more, she was not representing anybody I think but herself, and Stan, too. I think they were, they were an interesting couple of people. I think Madeleine was very bright, and Stan must have helped but they were two different people. Not true about the McAvoy's, they were one.

AL: Oh, I know, there was one more thing I wanted to ask you. Don Nicoll mentioned that he owns a camp that used to be co-owned by your family, the Ewing family, and the Browns? And so my question was, what's the history of that camp, how did that come to be?

KC: Well, it was about 1953 I think, and there were, there was the Kellogg, another Dr. Stanley, the Kelloggs wanted a place where they could go with their kids and camp and not be too far away. And then they'd talked about this to the Browns and the Ewings, and one day I looked in the newspaper and saw an ad for lake frontage on Hatcase Pond, and this was for sale by (*name*) Pond Club that owned I think seven lakes and all kinds of land around that part of Hancock County. But it was only twelve miles from Bangor, and nobody ever heard of Hatcase Pond.

So we went out, Lawrence and I went out and looked at it and we were delighted, so we said, "Well we'll do it, too." But by that time the Kelloggs had lost interest, so the Browns and the Ewings and we each put up I think it was a thousand dollars apiece. We bought, yeah, for three thousand dollars we bought about a thousand feet on the shore of Hatcase Pond, and we put up, for another three thousand dollars, we put up a twelve by twenty-four [12 x 24] wooden building, just to have a place to have a toilet and a fireplace and place to put our sleeping bags if we wanted overnight instead of, and we had that. Well then the Ewings moved away about a year or so after that, and they sold their share to the Browns and the Cutlers for, I don't know, by that time I think it cost us, building a road and stuff, the total cost of that place was, I can't remember, it must have been six thousand dollars or something. Anyway, we paid them what they had paid in and we owned it.

And we went, because you could take the kids out to swim and be back in an hour and a half. It was so convenient and so beautiful. And we used it until, I think it was when Eliot was working with Don Nicoll, one night, by that time we were spending our summer vacations at Hancock on the salt water and we weren't using it as much. And Eliot called and said his boss wanted to know if there was a place Eliot knew about where they could go camping. And so we said, "Go to Hatcase." And Don and his family and every Democrat east of the Mississippi I think spent a night or a day or something at Hatcase Pond. And eventually we decided that they were using it more than we, so we would have a sort of handshake relationship, where the only expenses that we had were for insurance and taxes, and if they wanted to take over that responsibility and keeping the place up and letting us come for a swim when we wanted to or pitch a tent or whatever, which I don't think we ever did, we'd do that as long as it was pleasant for both families. And we did it for years until I think 199-, well anyway, just before I came to Portland and we, at that point the Browns' children said that since it had been, the Brown share had been turned over to their five children, their children wanted out.

Well, we didn't, I didn't want to buy their share because I wasn't using it, and my kids weren't

around and they weren't using it. So I thought, well, we might as well sell it if we could and then that would be the end of it. So we got a, we asked Don if he was interested in buying it, and we had an appraisal done, and we, and he said yes, and the appraisal was satisfactory to him and so they bought it and there it is. And I still feel as if I can go and go for a swim. I'll never do that of course, but it's there and I used to go out once in the fall and look at the absolutely spectacular colors in the mountains around it, and go once in the spring to see that the lady slippers and other wild flowers that I knew where they were, were still there. And that was it.

AL: That's a great story. Thank you.

End of Interview