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Hansen, Don oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

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Interview with Don Hansen by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Hansen, Don

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

September 20, 2000

Place

Lewiston, Maine

ID Number

MOH 232

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Biographical Note

Don Hansen was born on July 14, 1935 in Presque Isle, Maine to Blanche (Stevenson) and Daniel Hansen. His father worked at a grange store and his mother was a secretary. Don attended Presque Isle High School, and then went to Boston University to study Journalism. When he graduated in 1959, he returned to Maine where he worked for a newspaper in Portland. In 1960, he was appointed the State House reporter and became familiar with many Maine politicians. He co-wrote a book with Theo Lippman called Muskie that came out during the 1972 presidential campaign. In 1972, he became editorial director of the Portland newspapers.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Presque Isle, Maine; Hansen's first impressions of Ed Muskie in the 1950s; Hansen's political philosophy; Maine politicians; Muskie's stance on the "peril point" amendment; sugar beet industry; Muskie's 1968 campaign; 1972 presidential campaign and William Loeb; Margaret Chase Smith; John Reed vs. Ken Curtis; Vietnam; Stan Tupper; and the Portland newspapers.

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Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview on September 20th, the year 2000, at the Muskie Archives at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. We are interviewing Don Hansen today and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. I guess to start off, if you could say and spell your full name?

Donald Hansen: Donald Hansen, and D-O-N-A-L-D, H-A-N-S-E-N, it's Danish and uh-.

AL: And where and when were you born?

DH: I was born July 14th, 1935 in Presque Isle, Maine.

AL: And is that where you grew up?

DH: Yes, yes, I went to Presque Isle High School and graduated there. I have no family left there now.

AL: Were both your parents from that area?

DH: No, they were both from New Brunswick, they were naturalized citizens so I'm a first generation American as a result of that, and they came to Presque Isle. My father worked in the grange store in Presque Isle and my mother was a secretary.

AL: And what were their names?

DH: Daniel Hansen and Blanche Hansen.

AL: And what was your mother's maiden name?

DH: Stevenson.

AL: Stevenson. Now they came from -

DH: New Brunswick.

AL: New Brunswick, Canada. Did you have siblings?

DH: No.

AL: You were an only child?

DH: Yeah.

AL: So what was the Presque Isle community like at that time?

DH: Well, it was obviously a small town and one main street, you know, and that was it. A farming community, one hotel, had been an air base there during WWII, but a very small rural town.

AL: What do you think growing up in a small community like that gave you as far as the formation of yourself? Well maybe I'm not asking that right. Let me ask a different question. What do you think some of the values were that your parents instilled in you growing up?

DH: I think probably to work hard, study, Christian values.

AL: Where did you go to college?

DH: I went to Boston University. I majored in journalism there. When I was, oh, I'd say probably ten years old, I got a little rubber printing press and you put in pieces of rubber type and you could make a little newspaper. And I was just fascinated by it and began to make newspapers. And that's when I decided that I wanted to get involved in journalism, so I never had any questions or doubts or thoughts of anything else from then on.

AL: Yeah. So that was a very young age to spark such an interest. What was it like going from Presque Isle, Maine to Boston?

DH: It was a radical change. I'd never really been, I had been to Washington and New York, you know, once on trips, but I never, never lived there. And I, Presque Isle was so rural that the first pizza I ever had in my life was in, was in Boston. It was the first time I'd ever seen television, I'd never seen television until I got to college in 1953. It was a very broadening experience.

Boston was a marvelous place and in those days they had a lot of legitimate theater. And a friend of mine was, my roommate my freshman year, was majoring in, going to major in theater and we used to go to the theaters. Well actually, we'd only, usually only, we'd wait outside and go in at intermission and see if we could find a seat, you know, just mingle with the crowd and go in. And I saw the last two acts, or the last acts of an awful lot of shows.

AL: So how did, once you had that experience in Boston, what made you want to come back to Maine?

DH: I'd always, I always liked Maine and even in, even during college in the summer time I worked up in Rangeley, for the chamber of commerce up there in the summer time. And when I graduated I went to Boothbay Harbor and edited a, the weekly newspaper there for a year. And then I moved to the Portland, Portland newspapers a year later.

AL: And what year was that? Was that '57?

DH: This was in 1959, very late in '59, and worked there all my career until I retired nine years ago. And I've got, I've got sons, both of them held more jobs in their young lives than I ever did. The society's changed in the way you keep moving these days. My older boy says if he doesn't interview for a job once a year, he's not doing right.

AL: Yeah. So you were in Maine in the fif-, in '53 you went away to college in Boston. Did you, had you ever heard of Ed Muskie or not until you came back?

DH: Oh (*unintelligible word*), hard to miss, no, I'd heard of him. He uh, I think the first year I was eligible to vote was in 1958 and he was running.

AL: Running for the senate.

DH: Yeah, yeah. And I can remember I cast an absentee ballot because I was going to basic training, I was in the National Guard and I was going away for six months on active duty. And I can remember I had just cast my absentee ballot when who came along but, down the main street, but Fred Payne. And I shook hands with him and said hello and it occurred to me, gee, this is the first time I voted and I voted for Ed Muskie and who do I see? The first thing.

AL: Neat. So you had a sense of who he was then in 1958.

DH: Oh sure.

AL: You had, you had been away but did you see what was happening with the elections?

DH: Oh yeah, oh sure, yeah.

AL: What was your impression from sort of, in the, of Ed Muskie?

DH: I didn't have any personal feelings about him. I felt strongly that Maine ought to have a two party system and they didn't, and, for years and years. And I was pleased to finally see somebody who could galvanize the party and so that you had a little competition. Because, you know, if there's only one party there isn't any clash of ideas and there isn't any spark for innovation, change. So I was happy about that, as I said.

AL: What -?

DH: But I've never joined a political party.

AL: No?

DH: No, never have.

AL: Was that in part for your professional career?

DH: Yeah, yeah, I thought it was better if I, and I've voted all over the lot. I voted for Richard Nixon, I voted against Richard Nixon. You know, I've never cast a, what, they used to have a straight ballot in Maine, the big box. I never case a ballot for all the candidates in one party, even today I can usually find, pick and choose.

AL: Now when did you first meet Ed Muskie?

DH: Oh, it must have been probably about 19-, late 1960 because I had just become the State House reporter, the political reporter, and so it would have been about that time. And I saw very little of him because he was in Washington and you really didn't see much of him. I wouldn't see much of him until 1964 when he was back campaigning, so I -

AL: Do you have recollections of your first meeting him?

DH: No, I don't, I don't. And I don't think we were really ever close at all, not at all. I enjoyed, I thought he was a terrific politician but, I don't know, we just didn't, didn't uh ever get close the way I was closer personally to some politicians than him.

AL: Which ones did you get close to?

DH: Oh, a variety of them. Stan Tupper, the congressman; John Reed, he's the godfather of my oldest child; and Ken Curtis; Bill Hathaway. I was always more comfortable with them than with Ed Muskie.

AL: What sort of, I have a, I have a question about when you're a reporter and they're a politician how do you sort of have the relationship and how do you still keep, you know, how do you, you know, there's always a line between.

DH: Yeah, I think, you don't want to get too close to any politician and for that reason you're, you have to be as impartial as you can, it's an impossible job. Obviously you tend to like somebody more than somebody else. But it's a, I'm speaking of a personal basis now, some people have ideas that I consider odd but I, you, I always tried to just report the facts as much as I could.

AL: Now in '64 when Ed Muskie was in the state a little more, running for reelection for the senate, what were your, did you follow him and report on his campaign, or -?

DH: Yeah, yeah, and, let's see, he was running against Cliff McIntyre at that time and Cliff was from Aroostook County as you may know. I'm sorry, I lost the question.

AL: Just sort of what, what did covering that campaign entail, what sort of things did you attend that he was at and what was Cliff McIntyre like?

DH: Cliff was Republican, conservative, a very, very likeable person but he was, he was not Muskie's equal by any intellectual standpoint. And even from a political standpoint, he, good Lord, I can remember Muskie walked rings around him in debates, and fashioned the debates in such a way that Cliff could not obviously win. I can remember one debate, God, it's coming back to me now. The title of the debate was, "Did Ed Muskie's vote against the Peril Point Amendment cause the closing of a mill in some Maine community?" Holy crow, that's a debate? And he, you, he was just very, very clever that way.

And I can remember he had a pretty good temper and I can remember it was towards the end of the campaign. I believe it was the Republicans took out an ad that said, a newspaper ad, "What changed you, Ed?" And it was sort of an open letter that, gee, you used to be a nice fellow as governor but now you've got to Washington and you, you're not one of us any more. What changed you, Ed? And I can remember Ed Muskie, I think it was at the Eastland Hotel, he was coming down to have a press conference to denounce this horrible personal attack on him. And he could, he could get very, very angry, I mean, he'd get so excited you could literally see the dandruff flying out of his hair, you know. But I can remember George Mitchell. When they came in George, he smiled at me and he said, "Gee, we were afraid they weren't going to do something awful like this to give him an excuse to get up and rant and rave."

AL: So they used it to their advantage.

DH: Yeah, yeah, well no, it was, he did have a colossal temper but there was also this, that, this thing. He liked to get up in righteous indignation to the horrible things that he perceived were done against him in a campaign.

AL: Interesting. How did the, when you first began in the news business what was it like from the perspective of how it's different now?

DH: It's completely different. When I started in the newspaper business it was axiomatic that a piece of equipment that the newspaper had would wear out before it became obsolete. I mean, you had moveable type, the invention of the moveable type, and a rotary press, and that was about it, and standard typewriters. And the technology didn't change. By the time I retired it was axiomatic that if you didn't get your money's worth out of a piece of equipment in four year's time, it was going, it's going to be changed, the technology is changing so rapidly. So it's just a revolutionary (*unintelligible word*) in the way newspapers are produced today and the way they were produced when I began.

AL: How many years were you the State House correspondent?

DH: Just about twelve years.

AL: Twelve years, and then you went to the Portland papers?

DH: No, no, I was with the Portland papers all my, I came back and became the editorial director for the Portland newspapers. And I did that until I retired nine years ago.

AL: Now as the State House correspondent, what would be, what would a typical day entail?

DH: Well, when the legislature was in session, which was, you know, five, six months, you were up there Monday through Friday and covering various aspects of the legislature and as well as the politics that were involved. And when the legislature was not in session you were basically a political reporter and a State House reporter. I covered news of state government. And in, I took a year off. I got a fellowship from the National Political Science Association, a neat course, a mid career year off. And I went to the Maxwell School at Syracuse and studied primarily, basically intergovernmental relations, the relationship between federal government and the state governments and the state governments and local governments. And that was helpful to me. I enjoyed that.

And that was I think in 1967, '68 so I got back to work just in time for that 1968 campaign, the vice presidential campaign. And it was on that campaign that I met Ted Lippman who was an editorial writer for, and a reporter, for the *Baltimore Sun* and we got to know each other during the campaign. And Ted said, "Look, I think there'd be a book in this and would you be interested

in doing it?" And I said, "Sure." I'd do the Maine end and he'd do the, do the Washington because he covered Washington, congress. And so we did, I took I think it was three months off in would be 1970 I believe, yeah, because the book came out in early '70, '71 or mid point in '71, I can't remember.

But, and Muskie had offered us ten hours of his time and we never got that much, it just didn't work out well. And, but the book itself, well he never, he never mentioned to me, never mentioned that book once, what he thought of it. And I never asked him. And then towards the end of his life, and he never told Ted either what he thought of it. And towards the end of his life he saw Ted in Washington and said, "Come in here and we'll talk for a minute." And he said, you know, "I never mentioned that book because I didn't think it helped my campaign at all, the presidential campaign." And of course that wasn't the reason we wrote the book. I can understand him feeling that way, but I think we, what we set out to do was to write a, I don't know that you've ever read the book -

AL: Got it right on my shelf.

DH: Oh good, yeah. Well, it, we tried to write a fair book, not a ode to somebody, we tried to be non partisan about the candidate. And so it, no man is perfect and certainly he wasn't. The, Loring and the Prestile Stream water classification to allow -

AL: Oh, the sugar beet industry?

DH: The sugar beet industry. You know, here was a guy who's, you know, an environmentalist from the word go and this was just a jarring change. So I can understand his attitude, but you did the best you can, so.

AL: Did you have some sess-, some, a little bit of time with him one on one?

DH: Oh yes, yeah, yeah, yeah, but we never got the full ten hours that we would have liked to have had. But the book did pretty well because we got it out early. There was another book, a biography of him, that came, had a very short life, it was a very good book but it had a short life because it came out just about the time of the primaries. And, geez, you know, in a couple of months he wasn't a candidate.

AL: Right. Do you know what book that was?

DH: I'm trying to remember desperately. You don't have it here.

AL: We have Journeys, which he wrote, but we also have, there's one called Muskie, the Man From Maine?

DH: There, that's it.

AL: Is that it?

DH: Ah-hah, I'm trying to remember who wrote that.

AL: Yeah, I don't have it right there. We have it in the collection, though. I know the book, yeah.

DH: Okay, okay, so we had a good advantage because we had basically close to a year to sell books and we sold a few.

AL: So you were covering political news in Maine in, during his vice presidential run?

DH: Yeah.

AL: What was, do you have a sense or recollections of that campaign and some of the occurrences or events that were covered? Or the feeling of Maine people about Muskie as vice president?

DH: Well he, he, that, I can remember the '68 campaign so much better because, one, it was longer, and two, I don't have much of a recollection of the '72 campaign. Because, one, it was relatively short and two, after New Hampshire, you know, he was raving about running against the phantom percentage and this was not how well he, whether he was going to win or not but by how much, you know. And he was saying, look, this is, well he won the New Hampshire primary but not by the percentage that the press I suppose and party leaders thought was necessary. So he was, in that sense he was running against a phantom percentage that he had to get to. And it went downhill, you know, after that. And so it was over and that was it. He went back to Maine and stopped campaigning.

AL: But the Hum-, right, the Humphrey-Muskie ticket in '68, do you remember that time period, can you tell me?

DH: Yeah, he was, yeah that was an exciting campaign because he stood a good chance of winning, you know, and it was very strange days. I can remember we were out in San Francisco. And he went to, had to be careful where he went on the campuses in those days because of the opposition to the Vietnam War. And Humphrey of course was vice president but he couldn't, he couldn't move away from the president far enough. I mean Muskie had a little more latitude, but I'm trying to remember, we went to one, San Francisco State College. All I remember about it, it's where Bill Russell, the basketball player, went to school. But it was said to be the safest campus in all of California and it was, these kids were well behaved. Then a month later I read in the newspaper where they'd just had huge riots there, you know. And, he was the strongest part of that ticket. I thought Hubert Humphrey was a wonderful fellow and, but there was a feeling that Muskie was a more preferable candidate than Humphrey because he was carrying all of Lyndon's luggage, the war, and Muskie was not. But there was, they lost.

AL: What, do you have recollections of what the feeling was in Maine, the people in Maine, any specific recollections of the support for Muskie in that campaign?

DH: In '68?

AL: Yes, '68.

DH: In '68 there was all kinds of support for him here obviously. But in 1972 a lot of Maine Democrats were upset because of his poor campaign. You know, it just didn't work well. And the crying in the snow in New Hampshire outside the *Union Leader* didn't help. I don't know whether he cried or not, it was snowing and he was outside in the snow and very emotional. But, you know, it's, politicians whether they cry or not, they're not supposed to and this was seen as a sign of weakness.

AL: One question I want to be sure and ask you is what you felt Ed Muskie's greatest contribution was to Maine and to the nation, if they were the same things or different?

DH: So far as Maine is concerned, it was touched on before, he recreated the Democratic Party in Maine and that was a wonderful thing. The Republicans had controlled the state for so long that they were fat and complacent and no ideas except to leave things alone, and he created, recreated a two party system here. And now we've got a system that, despite a couple of independent governors, the state is basically Democratic I think. And the Democrats will do, I'm sure, exactly what the Republicans do, did, and that is get fat and lackadaisical and then the Republicans will rejuvenate themselves or someone will do it for them. But that was his, I think, his greatest gift to Maine was creating a party.

As far as federal government was concerned, I think he brought a lot of concern. The environment, and he was one of the first senators who really saw the environment as a political, I mean a problem for politicians, not to be used in a political sense but to solve problems. I'd say that would probably be as important a contribution as he made. We're lucky to have had him.

We've uh, he and George Mitchell I think are wonderful gents, and on the other side you've got Bill Cohen, an exceptional senator, and it's, and you can go back to Margaret Chase Smith. For a small state we've produced a number of very talented, very talented people in contrast to the smallness, the numerical standing of the state. It's, quite often Maine has two senators that most people know them. I mean, people from elsewhere, you know. And it's true today because you've got two females. I don't think either one of them are up to the, intellectually up to the standards of Muskie or Mitchell or Cohen, but they're known, they're known. And you can't say that about a lot of states, who are the senators from, you know, sometimes you have to think. But, so we've been very fortunate that way.

AL: I'm trying to remember the time period when you were fully focused on politics in the state of Maine and how long Margaret Chase Smith was still in office. Did you get to cover her and get a sense of her while you were reporting?

DH: Yeah, uh-hunh.

AL: Well, how did she strike you?

DH: She was not my favorite person. She was, you know, we're going back a ways now and my brain isn't what it used to be when it comes to names. But she had, her administrative assistant -

AL: General Lewis, was it general or colonel?

DH: Yes, colonel, whatever, he was in effect I think her handler and mentor and they had a very close relationship. And I never had the, she was a very, in some ways very petty person, held grudges.

AL: Do you think that was her or Lewis?

DH: I think it was a combination, I think it was a combination of both. And he was certainly, they fit together beautifully. But I think, she could be very, very petty and almost like an enemies list, you know, (*unintelligible phrase*), like she had a list of people she didn't like and it was pretty long.

AL: Yeah. In terms of her dealings or relationships with the press, was she, was she sort of standoffish and Lewis would be the person in there associating or would she do it herself?

DH: No, she was a good politician and, in the sense that she didn't behave like a politician and that was one of her strengths with the electorate. She was just, never spent any money, never raised any money, she just went out with another person, went around, and got elected. And once in they couldn't get her out. Well eventually everybody stays too long, if you're a politician long enough you cast enough votes so pretty soon you've made a majority of the people unhappy. It's just got to work out that way because every time you vote you're going to make somebody unhappy and you keep doing it, taking enough votes, and pretty soon you've made a majority unhappy, it's got to work out that way. And that's when Bill Hathaway came along and defeated her.

AL: Do you think, did you see that coming in that election, or was it a surprise that he won?

DH: I think I thought, I think I thought she'd be beaten the last time, yeah, yeah. She was getting older and testier and, you stay too long.

AL: Do you recall the, Lucia Cormier?

DH: Now that, I didn't cover that campaign, that was, I came in very at the end in 1960. Yeah, I do remember it because of its historic significance. I never really knew Lucia, I met her a few

times afterwards but didn't know her at all.

AL: Are there any stories or recollections you have that I haven't prompted with my questions that you feel are important to -?

DH: About Muskie?

AL: About Muskie or your times as a news man that sort of illustrate?

DH: No, I don't think so, honestly.

AL: That's okay. I have a question, a little bit about your covering some of the other governors and what they were like. So you weren't, you came in right after Ed Muskie went to the senate so you didn't -

DH: Well, he went in '69, went to, went to congress-.

AL: '59.

DH: '59, I'm sorry, and it was a couple of years later that I went up to Augusta.

AL: So John Reed was someone you got to know through covering the Blaine House.

DH: Yeah, un-hunh, yeah.

AL: What was his administration like, and how did he compare with, say, Curtis and others?

DH: He was, I, frankly I think Curtis was a better governor. I can remember at one point. Well, John was a very nice man but politically he wasn't the brightest bulb on the tree from a political standpoint. He wasn't an innovative governor in particular but, I mean, compared to, say, Ken Curtis who I thought was a very good governor. But if you pressed me, you know, right now I can't think offhand, I couldn't name five things that he did, but very good governor, very popular governor and pretty politically astute.

John Reed ended up all right because, politically, because he supported the Vietnam War. And Lyndon Johnson, he became I think in 1967 president of the National Governor's Conference. And oddly enough because the Democrats voted for him and his own Republicans did not, and this was because he supported Lyndon Johnson's view on the war. And Lyndon Johnson always remembered that and got him on the National Highway Transportation Board and then he worked in Washington ever since. So the, his position on the war helped him politically, and I don't mean to suggest that his position on the war was politically motivated then at all. But he just, ironically it worked out very well for him.

AL: Now the people I've talked to over these last couple years have sort of a universal appeal

for Ken Curtis. What is, I have not had the honor of meeting him yet, what is it about him that's so likeable?

DH: That's, you just put your finger on it, he is likeable, he's as, in a way that Ed Muskie was not. He's so approachable, just a genuinely friendly, wonderful guy. Had a lot of tragedy in his life, overcome it, just awfully nice person. You know, you meet people like that and say, wow. You may not agree with them but, boy, you like them.

AL: And Stan Tupper you said you got to know quite well.

DH: Yeah, yeah, Stan, oh God, very liberal Republican campaign in 1964, the Goldwater. He didn't like Goldwater and, God, I can remember Republicans would spit on him and, you know, he's, but a very nice guy. He was, he was, they used to have, I don't know if they still do, they had a Young Republican club in Maine, Young Republicans. And he was thirty-nine years old, you could, you had to get out when you were forty, he was thirty-nine years old, a Young Republican, and he was a grandfather. At thirty-nine he was a grandfather. He got married about sixteen, his son got married about sixteen and there you are.

And he went to a, he's a bright guy, but he went to a Matchbox law school where, you know, you used to be able to do it that way, send away, and his father was a lawyer and I'm sure it helped. And, yeah, he was a very nice fellow. As a matter of fact I have a summer place, well, outside of Boothbay Harbor in Southport and he's still up there practicing law, you know. He's a very nice fellow.

[Aside: Wow, what are they doing up there?]

AL: Were there any others that you, oh, I know what I was going to ask you, when you were at the Portland papers who was your boss or supervisor, or the owner of the paper?

DH: Jean Gannett Williams, Holly, she was married several times and she was the majority owner. I reported to John DiMatteo who came in as the publisher, chief executive officer. And when he retired I knew that the situation was going to change and so I decided to retire and so I left at that time. And things did change and eventually the papers were sold and Jeanine would have been devastated by it. She worked very hard to try to keep that as a family newspaper. At one point it was almost sold to the Gannett organization when she owned it, and it was going to be sold and at the last minute it broke down. And I think the reason she thought about selling was all the managers that she had were getting old. And I think that's what led her to believe, gee, well maybe I ought to sell at this point. And then she decided, no, I'm going to get, I'm going to keep it, I'm going to get new people, younger people there, and she did. But there comes a time when you're not making any money, and there was a long period. It was a cash machine up until about into the, into, from the sixties well into the eighties, it was making a ton of money. And then times got hard. The family, gee, what they were getting out it, they'd have been better off selling the newspaper and putting, getting a better return on their money than they were getting in those days. And then finally things got better, but the kids, the family weren't

interested in doing what she'd done which was running the paper so it was sold.

AL: Great, well thank you for your time, I appreciate it.

DH: Okay, thank you.

End of Interview