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Harpe, Larry oral history interview

Nicholas Christie

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Interview with Larry Harpe by Nicholas Christie

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Harpe, Larry

Interviewer

Christie, Nicholas

Date

June 5, 2001

Place

Rumford, Maine

ID Number

MOH 276

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Biographical Note

Larry Harpe was born on October 17, 1914 in Rumford, Maine. He was in the same class as Ed Muskie in the Rumford school system. He went on to become a welder, and served in the Navy during World War II. He has been very active in his community, and served as the Rumford Fire Chief for over twenty years.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: family background; Lucille Abbott; the draft; Oxford Paper Mill; serving as Fire Chief; Edmund S. Muskie; Rumford, Maine community; George Mitchell; class reunion; and the Senior Citizen Club.

Indexed Names

Abbott, Lucille Hicks

Carey, Thomas

Fossett, Celia Isadora (Cleary)

Harpe, John

Harpe, Larry
Humphrey, Hubert H. (Hubert Horatio), 1911-1978
Lemieux, Eva
McGovern, George S. (George Stanley), 1922-
McQuade, J. Harold
Mitchell, George J. (George John), 1933-
Muskie, Edmund S., 1914-1996
Muskie, Jane Gray

Transcript

Nicholas Christie: This is Nick Christie, interviewer for the Muskie Archives. This is the first interview with Larry Harpe, held in his home in Rumford, Maine on the afternoon of June 5th, 2001. Mr. Harpe, could you state your full name, please, and spell it?

Larry Harpe: Lawrence Alton Harpe. L-A-W-R-E-N-C-E, and Alton is A-L-T-O-N, my middle name, and H-A-R-P-E is my last name.

NC: Okay, now can you tell me where and when you were born?

LH: October 17, 1914, and born in Rumford.

NC: Okay, I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your family, your mother and father's-

LH: My father was born in Milan, New Hampshire, and my mother was born in Lewiston, Maine. And my father (*unintelligible word*), well, they came down from New Hampshire. His dad worked in the woods, he was at the time a foreman in the woods, chopping and stuff of that nature. And my mother was from a French family of Lemieux in Lewiston, and her family were contractors, they were brick masons. And her father and his brothers, I don't know how many there were, they constructed the park, the Strathglass Park here in Rumford. This was built by the Oxford Paper Company, and they were part of the crew that built these homes down there. I don't know exactly how many but they're still there, and anything else about my family?

NC: Well, I guess a good place to start would be, oh, can I also get their names?

LH: John Harpe was my father's name, and my mother was Eva Lemieux, L-E-M-I-E-U-X.

NC: Now where did you, when you were born, where were you living in Rumford?

LH: On Knox Street up above there.

NC: Okay, and how long did you stay there?

LH: That I don't know. The family moved to the next, that I can remember. We were living

on Oxford Avenue next to Pine Street up in Rumford, we lived there for quite a number of years. Then we moved down on Maine Avenue, which is pretty close to the St. Athanasius-St. John's School. And we lived there until I entered high school. My freshman year in high school we moved on in the Strathglass Park, and from there I was graduated, and later on got married. I was twenty years old when I got married (*unintelligible phrase*).

NC: Do you have any siblings?

LH: We had one little girl and we lost her, had the sickness. And my wife, oh, she was a pretty sickly girl for a while.

NC: Now, early, your early schooling in Rumford, what school did you go to before high school?

LH: Went to the, well, it was St. John's School. It's a parish school, which is now St. Athanasius-St. John, they combined the parishes in later years.

NC: Do you remember what, you have any memories from that school?

LH: Quite a few I guess. But Muskie was not part of our, I don't know where he went to. Of course, Rumford is kind of divided up anyway. What's up over the hill by the power company, that's known as the Virginia section and that's where he lived, up on Hemingway, I think it was Hemingway Street. We lived up in this section, in the town, so.

NC: Okay, now, Stickeytown.

LH: No, no, Stickeytown is the other direction.

NC: Okay. In elementary school, how big were the classes?

LH: Oh, I'd say about twenty, twenty-five, no more.

NC: Okay. Do you remember any specific teachers from that time, or -?

LH: They were all nuns.

NC: They were all nuns. Does Lucille Abbott -?

LH: I knew her very well, yeah.

NC: Okay, she's in this picture right here from your class reunion.

LH: I was very fond of her as a history teacher, that's what she taught. And I, that was one of my pet subjects.

NC: History?

LH: History.

NC: Okay, now what grades was she teaching, was that high school?

LH: High school, yeah.

NC: Okay, do you have any specific memories about her that -?

LH: Not really, except that she was a good teacher. We enjoyed her.

NC: You were very fond of her?

LH: Yes, she had a good sense of humor, you know. I like that.

NC: Now, then you went to high school.

LH: That was in high school.

NC: Right, and what high school did you go to?

LH: Stephen's High.

NC: Stephen's High, and you graduated in the class of -?

LH: Nineteen thirty-two.

NC: Nineteen thirty-two, okay. Now, how big was the class, or were the classes, in high school?

LH: A pretty good size. A high, of course, I mean you take like a class in history, we probably were twenty or twenty-five, I think, roughly.

NC: And there was four classes a day, or?

LH: Yeah, we were supposed to take five subjects, you know, and of course we had a study period. I think in all there was seven periods during a school day. Five of them I think were, went to classes, and you had a couple of study periods.

NC: And now after high school what did you do?

LH: I worked in the A&P store for a while, and then I got a job in the paper mill. And I stayed in the paper mill until just before the war, then I went to work in the shipyard. I wanted to become a welder. And my wife said, she had agreed that she would go to work and I would go to school. But I went down to the shipyard and applied down there, and they said, "We'll teach you how to weld, and you can work while you're doing it." So that was a pretty good deal, so I took

it. And I worked there about a year and, you want me to go on with this?

NC: Absolutely.

LH: Then I was drafted. Well, I'm going to go back a little bit. I did belong to the Naval Reserves, and when they were calling people up a few of us, one guy's in that picture, we went to Portland to get examined. And they turned me down, so that made me 4F. But later on, when I was called again, they didn't think anything about that, and I was drafted. And I had a choice to go the Army or the Navy, and I chose the Navy, because where I had belonged to the Naval Reserves. And they wanted to give me the rating that I had in the Naval Reserves, and I refused it because I was a yeoman in the Naval Reserves, and the only reason was that I knew how to type. But I did turn the, because I wanted to become a welder, and I was very fortunate after I got out of boot camp. I went, they sent me to school down in Boston, Wentworth Institute, and I learned to be a welder, a machinist, tin knocker. That was just what I wanted.

NC: That was in preparation for working the yard.

LH: No, no, this was in the Navy. And then from that school they, I was sent to, I was lucky to get an advanced welding school down at Treasure Island in San Francisco. I came out of there as a third-class petty officer. And from there I went to Pearl Harbor. And then from Pearl Harbor, one day a fellow came along and says, "They need somebody right away, a second metal smith." He says, "If you want it they might, you might get a new ship, we don't know where you're going to go." I said, "I'll take it." And that night they put me aboard a plane and flew me to Saipan. Now, Saipan, it was a twenty-six hour flight, it was my first airplane flight. And the next morning I went to Tinian, and I stayed there the rest of the war.

NC: What year was it that you left Pearl Harbor?

LH: Oh boy, must have been '43.

NC: Forty-three?

LH: Yeah, because I was discharged, I know, in 1945, in December, so it had to be '43.

NC: Okay, now prior to going in the Navy, when you were working at the mill, that was the Oxford Paper Mill?

LH: Yes.

NC: What was it like working there, what was your specific job?

LH: I worked in the pulp mill. What they called the job I had was a wet machine, and the pulp came rolling in the wet machine, and we'd cut it off with a stick, a sharpened stick. But they're no longer there, and we used to put them aside on the (*unintelligible word*). And they used to pile them away, and whenever they needed extra pulp they could take them out from a pile, and then they would use it and they'd call it beaters. And it would beat it up, and from then on it could go

for preparation, stock preparation. You know, make pulp, to make, get onto the paper machine.

(Break in taping.)

NC: I'm resuming the interview now. So you were talking about the paper mill and what it was like to work there. Now, the mill's still there.

LH: Yes, it is.

NC: How, did you go back to the mill after -?

LH: Yes, I did. But I went back into the pulp mill, and then I left them again. I went to work for a welder, a welding firm.

(Break in taping.)

NC: Okay, so we were talking about when you came back to the mill, and then you said that you left at one point.

LH: Yeah, I went to work for a contractor. I mean, he done welding for a living and jobs. I worked for him for about not quite a year, then I went back into the mill and I stayed with them. I was fortunate to get into the pipe shop, which is perfectly all right with me. And the welding foreman kept borrowing me, and that's where I ended up, welding most of the time. And from there, then there came a layoff. And then I went to, had a layoff, and I, you had to bid on jobs, and I got a job in the finishing department, which was just fine. But in the meantime, I mean not in the meantime, the, I kept working there. But anyway, the man who took charge of the sprinklers, sprinkler system, passed away. And his foreman knew me, and he talked to me, and he asked me if I would be interested in that job. And I told him I would be, and I took the job. This was a salaried job. So I took it and I went to work for them, and I worked there for, I ended up, I was the supervisor of that department. But this is where I was a fire chief, and I took a, done an awful lot of fire training.

NC: This was a volunteer?

LH: Well, we had a plant brigade and. But we took care of all the sprinkler systems in the mill and part of the security, all the watchmen and all that. We all, I think we were about seventeen people in all. But it took a little while before I got to be a supervisor.

NC: What was it like being a fire chief?

LH: I enjoyed that very, very much. And such that I done a lot of training. And the man I worked for, Lincoln Fisk, he was very interested in the things that I was getting into. And he helped me a great deal, and he sent me to an awful lot of schools, and I met an awful lot of people that way.

NC: What was his name, again?

LH: Lincoln Fisk.

NC: Lincoln Fisk, okay.

LH: He lives up in East Bethel now.

NC: East Bethel, okay. Now, going back to your family, was your family in any way political?

LH: No, no.

NC: Not at all.

LH: No.

NC: Okay, did you become political during your -?

LH: Not really.

NC: Not really?

LH: No, I mean, my dad, he was a very strong Democrat, and I grew up to be a Democrat. But no, I never got involved in the politics, it never interested me.

NC: But you've always been a registered Democrat.

LH: Yes, and I've always voted, always. Last night we had a town meeting. That's the first town meeting I've missed for I don't know how long, and this is on account of my health that I didn't go.

NC: What is Rumford like now, politically speaking, in terms of parties?

LH: Really I think it's more Democratic than Republican, if that's what you're getting at, yeah.

NC: Do you have any sense that it's changed since you were -?

LH: No, I don't think it has a great deal. Of course, there's always someone that'll cause an upheaval once in a while.

NC: That's about it.

LH: Yeah, like any other town.

NC: Let's see, now economically, in Rumford the mill has played a major role.

LH: It has, still does.

NC: Still does. Outside of that, where does the majority of employment fit?

LH: Just the local stores and people. I think a lot of people are working somewheres out of town because there's been layoffs in the mill, and somebody, these people had to go to work someplace. I think there's a lot of them traveling, a lot of them are doing a lot of traveling. Of course, we used to have, you know, the match mills and clothespin mills in the town of Dixfield, and that's all gone. Now there is another company down in there. It's lumber, and I don't know exactly, it's Irving anyway, and that's a Canadian outfit, made by the mill out there. I'm not too active anymore to know what's going on.

NC: Now, when you were in high school, you never actually were in the class with Muskie.

LH: No, no.

NC: Okay, but do you have any memories of him from high school?

LH: Oh yes, I remember we played basketball. Of course he was taller than most of us, and we, I played class basketball and he got promoted into the varsity, so I lost him there. So, yeah, that's about it, I guess. And I think on the track team, too, I think he was on the track team, but I'm not positive. The yearbook would tell you that.

NC: Do you have any memories of him personally as a high school student?

LH: Oh yes, well, I knew him and we talked. But nothing that, I didn't chum with him or anything, no.

NC: Do you remember what sort of personality he had, was he -?

LH: Very nice fellow to talk to, he was really nice, yeah. Yes, I do remember him for that.

NC: Now, he's had, he has quite a memory here in Rumford.

LH: He sure has.

NC: How have you seen that develop?

LH: Well, when he was running for, I think senator, they had a some kind of a meeting of, something special for him at the American Legion. And I was getting in line to go shake his hand, and he, "Hey, Larry," you know, and he, like you could punch me in the belly. You know, so that's a little familiarity.

NC: Now, so you were living in Rumford when Senator Muskie first started his campaigns to start up the Democratic Party here.

LH: Yes.

NC: Do you remember anything politically from that time about how -?

LH: Well, the people up, there was a group of people had a supper for him to help him on his campaign. This is when he was running for governor, and the supper was being held at what's called St. Rocco Hall, which is still there, but I don't know if it's still called St. Rocco Hall or not. But, so we went to that supper, and there was so many of us from the class of '32 that someone started, "Hey, there's so many of us here, why don't we have a little class reunion." So a few of the fellows went around and took up a little collection, they went out and got a little bit of liquor. I can remember that, and where they got it I don't know. But anyway, they come back with it and we had a little party. And it was a very nice little party. I do remember dancing with Muskie's wife.

NC: Jane.

LH: Yeah, so that's about all I can remember.

NC: Now, and then Muskie, of course, went on to run for senator and then for president in '68 and '72. Do you know, you know, Rumford, knowing that he came from here and now was on a national level, did you see how that, how the town felt about his -?

LH: Everybody was very proud of him, very proud of him. And nothing was ever done. I don't know how often he came to Rumford, you know, but they named the auditorium at the high school when they built the high school, the Muskie Building, which all pleased us all, you know. But to see him, I never seen him too much. Of course, I was a pretty busy guy, too, and he was. But I was always proud of him. What else can you say, you know? He done well, and he was a nice fellow.

NC: Now there's a memorial now in town.

LH: Yes, yes.

NC: That was put together by Harold McQuade -?

LH: Harold McQuade and Tom Carey, I think it was.

NC: And that got put up a couple years ago.

LH: Just about.

NC: Just about. Did you go to the commemoration for it?

LH: No, no, I wasn't invited, so I didn't go.

NC: Let's see, now ethnically, Rumford, what sort of make up was Rumford like when you were a kid growing up here?

LH: All different nationalities, yeah. We had a lot of the Italians and French, and all in different sections of the town, you know, more or less.

NC: I was wondering if you could explain to me kind of how those sections break up. There was Stickeytown, Virginia, and -.

LH: Well, Smith Crossing was the Italian section. The French were all over town, and up in Virginia it was kind of a mixed thing. Spruce Street and Holyoke Avenue, that was mostly Lithuanian people. Of course, I mean, it doesn't run into a certain section, but there were more Lithuanian people on Spruce Street than there were other people. But there were other people there, too. But Smith Crossing, the same thing, too. Really, it was mostly Italian.

NC: So certainly not much of a Polish.

LH: No, no, no. Of course, Mexico had those groups, too, you know. But, no, I don't, as far as Polish. Of course I, perhaps we didn't know the difference between the Polish people and the Lithuanian people, you know, all right people.

NC: And then, so Muskie grew up here both being Polish and Catholic, in Rumford.

LH: Yes, definitely. Of course we used to have two churches, and there was the Irish church and the French church. Eventually, they (*unintelligible phrase*), they combined. And what really brought that on is the lack of priests. At one time there was three priests in each parish, and now there's only one.

NC: Okay, so what is Rumford like today, living in Rumford?

LH: Well, it's all right, it's my hometown and I love it. But it's, they, they're not too, the young people, after they graduate from high school, they leave town, and there's not too many that stay behind. And you can't blame them, there's nothing here.

NC: In terms of work.

LH: Yeah.

NC: Where, do they mostly go to -?

LH: I have no idea. I mean they spread all over. A lot of them will go to college, and then, which I think is appropriate.

NC: Portland, probably. So, politically Maine has, since Muskie, the Democratic Party has grown immensely.

LH: Yes, it has.

NC: Can you remember the atmosphere in the sixties, late fifties, when that party was growing?

LH: It was, but the Republicans were very strong, the Maine party, you might say. But Muskie had a great influence as a Democrat, and since he came in, to me, the Democratic Party grew. And what it is today, I think he had a lot to do with it. Mitchell, too, was a great leader.

NC: George Mitchell?

LH: George Mitchell.

NC: Now, going back. So you worked as a welder, and then you went, you were working as a fire chief, and working with the sprinklers. From what years did you do that?

LH: Geez, over twenty years. That was called the Plant Protection Department. I think I probably worked with them for twenty-five years, in the plant protection. I got out in the mill about 1940, since 1950, then I retired in 1976.

NC: And you've been living here at 245 Washington since?

LH: The last, I've had three homes. I bought a house in South Rumford. And we got flooded, and we lived there for seven years, and bought a brand new house, a place called Swift Avenue. And I think I lived there ten years, and I bought this house. My wife didn't like it down there, so we (*unintelligible phrase*), so we came here.

NC: Let's see, so your political leanings?

LH: I'm still a Democrat.

NC: Still a Democrat, okay. Another teacher I wanted to ask you about from high school is Mrs. Cleary.

LH: Cleary, yeah.

NC: Oh, she's in here as well. What do you remember about her?

LH: She was my homeroom teacher. And she, of course, you know, you go in and out of your homeroom, and I'd always go. So one day she called me back, she said, "Larry," she said, "smile." She said, "You go by here, I'm breaking my face here making, smiling at you, and you never even look at me."

NC: You were serious looking?

LH: Yeah, so every time I went by I would smile at her. Which was all right. And she used to

teach English, and she was a nice teacher, nice gal.

NC: Was the Rumford high school pretty strict?

LH: I never thought so, no. Well, you mind your own business and, yeah, it was a good school to go to.

NC: Academically you felt it was very good?

LH: Yes, very good.

NC: Now you did sports in high school, or you did basketball?

LH: Not too much, no, because I hurt my back. But I did try out for football and basketball.

NC: Now, Muskie had a lot to do with the environment in Maine.

LH: Yes, he did, yes he did. I think, what did they call him, Mr. Clean?

NC: Mr. Clean, right. And especially living in a mill town, did you see his influence in the -?

LH: Not so much his influence, but what he created, yes. Because the river has been cleaned up one hell of a lot.

NC: Since -?

LH: Oh, definitely. Yes, very much so. And I think the air has been, too.

NC: Yeah, the Clean Air Act and all that. What, how would you classify Muskie's overall effect?

LH: I don't know if he's got that much of an influence, but see he hasn't lived here, and he's been gone. But I mean, what he's been doing in Washington, I think, has been felt here especially. Especially the river and all that stuff.

NC: Maine in general, probably.

LH: Yes.

NC: Now, do you, in the 1972 election, when he was running for president, he was running for the Democratic nomination against George McGovern and Hubert Humphrey.

LH: Humphrey's vice president or something.

NC: In '72 he was running for president. In '68 he was running as vice president under Humphrey. But in '72 he didn't win the nomination. Do you remember anything from that time

about following -?

LH: I was just following it in the newspapers, that's all we ever did, I ever did anyway.

NC: Were you surprised that he didn't get further in national politics in terms of the presidency?

LH: Yes. I was praying for him.

NC: Do you think there was any reason why he didn't win that election?

LH: No, I don't. Just that he was a Democrat. I mean, that's my thinking on it.

NC: Do you have, I was wondering if you have any more anecdotes from school specifically.

LH: Of course, we never got together, you know.

NC: Or even forgetting Muskie, just generally speaking, what the atmosphere was like.

LH: The atmosphere was good. I mean, we always got, I always thought we got along fine, everybody in our class. Of course we didn't see each other a heck of a lot. And that's when I learned to, I never did learn to dance, but I used to go to socials. I don't ever remember Ed being at the socials that we had, there was these dances.

NC: I'm under the impression that he was a pretty studious-

LH: Yes, he was. Couldn't say nothing bad about the guy.

NC: Then he went to Bates from here.

LH: Yes, yes he did.

NC: That was probably the last time you made personal contact with him as an -

LH: I think so, yeah.

NC: Until -

LH: Yeah, I was kind of pleased about it, that time when we had that class reunion. They all came, and then, I was master of ceremonies, and after we got into the room and it just, I looked the crowd over and he was sitting, we had Mr. Brown and Mrs. Hicks [Lucille Hicks Abbott] and Mrs. Cleary, they came to that reunion. And he sat with them, and they were up in one corner. And when I looked the room over, I wanted to hear from everybody, so I started it myself and then worked from right to left until I got to where Muskie was. So he was really our last speaker. And, but I wanted everybody to, I said, "I'll give you five minutes, first of all I'll give you five minutes of talk and introduce who you're with, who's with you." And then I said, "Tell us what

you've been doing for five minutes." So then I said, "I'd like to have everybody do it," and I said, "I'll start to my right," and I started myself, and then ended up with Ed Muskie.

NC: He must have been excited to be there.

LH: Yeah, I think so, yeah.

NC: Well, I guess I want to ask if you have anything else you'd like to add.

LH: No, that's about all I can think of. The only recollection I told you about at the Legion that time. Met him there. And whenever he was in town, I don't ever remember going anywheres, maybe except at the Legion. And like, when they dedicated the Muskie Building I was there for the groundbreaking ceremony, he wasn't there. I don't know if he ever came or not.

NC: I'm going to have to see that.

LH: The Muskie Building?

NC: Yeah.

LH: That's where the retired people are.

NC: Do you still, with the community that you're in touch with here, does his name ever come up in -?

LH: Oh yes, because I belong to the Senior Citizen. In fact I just got off the board. I've been on that board for twenty-something years, the Senior Citizen Board, and we used to meet at the Muskie Building a great deal.

NC: What do you do, what was the Senior Citizens Board, what's their function?

LH: Just a social activities to keep the groups together, to sponsor trips and banquets and whatever you want, you know, senior citizens do.

NC: You're still active in that?

LH: I just got off the board.

NC: Just got off the board.

LH: Now, we had a volunteer breakfast last week, and that's my last function with them. And my lady friend is president, or the chairman of the board.

NC: Oh, okay. What's her name?

LH: Elly, Eleanor Ames. She lives over in Mexico.

NC: Oh, okay. All right, is there anything else that you'd like to add?

LH: Not that I know of.

NC: Okay, well I really appreciate the interview -

LH: Anything else I can think of, I'd be only too pleased to do it.

NC: Okay, let me take a break for a second.

End of Interview
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