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Isaacson, Phil oral history interview

Meredith Gethin-Jones

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Interview with Phil Isaacson by Meredith Gethin-Jones

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Isaacson, Phil

Interviewer

Gethin-Jones, Meredith

Date

May 13, 1999

Place

Lewiston, Maine

ID Number

MOH 091

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Biographical Note

Phil Isaacson was born in Lewiston, Maine on June 19, 1924. He attended Lewiston primary schools. He spent his first two years of high school at Lewiston High School and his second two at Hebron Academy. He attended Bates College where he was a part of the V-12 Naval officer training program. He was in the Navy from the tail end of WWII until 1946. He then returned to Bates and graduated in 1947. He then entered Harvard Law School where he concentrated on corporate law. He practiced law with his father for almost 25 years. He served on the Lewiston Board of Finance. He served as Corporation Counsel under Malenfant, Rancourt, and Beliveau. He was also the Assistant County Attorney.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Isaacson's wife's trip to the National Convention; "Old maid" Irish school teachers in the Lewiston school system during the 20s, 30s, and 40s; Bates as culturally homogenous in the 1940s; Lewiston as the industrial heart of Maine; the nature of Democrats in Lewiston; labor unions; blue collar two worker families in Lewiston during the 30s and 40s; Auburn city seal; shoe and leather bank in Auburn; Lewiston as "classless" society; small middle class, no upper class; Bates' beginnings as Maine State Seminary; Boston as "the hub" of the universe and the "American Athens"; Lewiston government before 1980; Lyndon

Johnson's "if you're not part of the solution, you are part of the problem"; generational shift on view of rights; decline in size of Lewiston's Jewish population; and social clubs of Lewiston.

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Transcript

Meredith Gethin-Jones: Okay, we're here for an interview with Philip Isaacson, Meredith Gethin-Jones is interviewing. It is May 13th, 1999 at Philip Isaacson's office of law. Could you please state your full name and spell it?

Philip Isaacson: My name is Philip M. Isaacson, P-H-I-L-I-P, M as in Maine, Isaacson, I-S-A-A-C-S-O-N.

MJ: Could you please give me your date and place of birth?

PI: I was born in Lewiston, Maine, 6-16-24.

MJ: And the names of your parents?

PI: Father's name's Harris M. Isaacson; he was, he attended Bates. My mother's maiden name was Goldie Ruth Resnick, R-E-S-N-I-C-K.

MJ: And your siblings?

PI: And my sibling is my sister Marilyn, she's M-A-R-I-L-Y-N, L, her middle initial, Simonds, S-I-M-O-N-D-S.

MJ: Are you older or younger than her?

PI: I am four years older.

MJ: Where and when did you meet your wife?

PI: I met my wife skiing in North Con-, was it North Conway? Yeah, I met my wife skiing really near North Conway, New Hampshire in December 1951.

(Tape stopped.)

MJ: and politics and community concerns?

PI: She shared my community concerns and encouraged me to be involved in politics. She did not have an interest in being in politics personally other than in participating, and that's not so, is it? She did participate because she was very actively involved in the Maynard Dolloff primary and was always involved in the city of Lewiston municipal elections in the 1950s and perhaps even the very early 1960s. Yeah, and she always went to the local caucuses as well, so she was very enthusiastic about it. She was a member of the League of Women Voters and I think she was an officer in the League of Women Voters; was a delegate once to the National Convention, so yeah, she was active. As, in terms of what women did in those days.

MJ: How did she draw you into community concerns?

PI: I don't know that she drew me and I think, you know, we were mutually interested in the community. I'm, I am a native of Lewiston; I've lived here all my life, and I was very int-, I was of course interested in advancing the interests of this community.

MJ: Where did you attend elementary and secondary school?

PI: Both in Lewiston. Well, not entirely. Elementary yes, two years at Lewiston High School and two years at Hebron Academy, so part of my secondary school was not in the Lewiston system.

MJ: Do you have any recollections of your experiences in school that stand out?

PI: That stand out? I think as a general statement I might state that I was educated by old maid Irish school teachers almost exclusively through my sophomore year in high school and I profited greatly from that. These were people who were career teachers who were absolutely dedicated to their work; insisted on a high level of performance. And I think they prepared me very well for the years that were to come. And I still draw from time to time specifically on some of the things they taught me.

MJ: Where and why did you attend college, or where did you attend college and why did you attend there?

PI: Well, my going to college is a little bit exotic. I graduated from Hebron in 1942. I was eighteen years old and I anticipated that I was going to get drafted very soon. My father was the chairman of the draft board and told me that I would probably get drafted in October. But we both thought it was a very good idea for me nevertheless to apply to a college and get admitted to a college so that some day, after I finished military service and the war was over, I would have a place to go to.

But my parents didn't encourage me to go very far from home because they wanted me to be around as long as I could be around, and so the obvious place was Bates. And so I did apply to Bates very late; I didn't think I was going to apply to a college because I thought I could go into the service right off. But anyhow, I did apply to Bates probably as late as the end of April and in those days it was very, very easy to get into any college because there were very few men around and so I did get admitted. And as luck would have it, very soon after college began in the fall, recruiters came around and they were offering a program called V-12. And V-12 was a Naval officers' training program and I was able to be admitted to the program. And that gave me an opportunity to finish my freshman year at Bates. And then at the end of that time I had to go in; go on active duty. But V-12 sent me right back to Bates, so I not only finished two years as a civilian, I finished three more years in the Navy after the V-12 program at Bates and that gave me five semesters.

So my going to Bates turned out to be a very fortuitous decision on my part, but I might not have made that same decision if it was conventional peace time. I perhaps would have gone someplace else, not because of the quality of Bates but I don't think it's a very good idea to go to college in your own home town. It's, one of the reasons for going to college is a broadening of perception, a sense of horizons and that, you limit yourself when you go to school in your own home town. You should find out what other communities are like and meet a broader range of people. I think in those days the kids that went to Bates were almost of a type; there was very little breadth of student recruiting and nothing like Bates today.

MJ: So after you completed the V-12 program, did you return to Bates?

PI: Yeah, and then I had to go on, then I went on to, do you want the whole story? I went on to pre-midshipman's school, then midshipman's school, then advanced line officer training school, and finally into the Pacific for the last few months of World War II. And I remained in because I was obliged to remain in the service for another year. And that's because I had a relatively small amount of sea duty when the war ended. And I came back to Bates in the fall of 1946.

MJ: And then after Bates, did you go on to law school immediately?

PI: Yeah, I went directly to law school.

MJ: Where did you attend law school?

PI: I went to Harvard.

MJ: And why did you choose to practice law?

PI: Well, I suppose a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that my father was a lawyer, so I always assumed that I would be a lawyer, and in fact I was.

MJ: Were you a political science major at Bates?

PI: No, I was a Biology major.

MJ: A Biology major. How were your experiences, well I guess in Massachusetts, different from that of Maine?

PI: Oh, it was entering another world. It was, that was one of the enlarging experiences of my life: to live in Cambridge, Massachusetts for three years. At that particular time it was a great benediction. The, number one, my class in law school was almost as large as the total student body at Bates. I think that there may have been six, over six hundred and fifty men in my class, (there weren't women in those days), so there may have been about six hundred and fifty kids in my class and Bates probably only had seven hundred and some odd in the total enrollment. And the people in my class came from all over the country; a number of foreign countries. Of course Cambridge is one of the most sophisticated places on the face of the earth, and Boston of course with all that it offered in cultural opportunities; and Bates had virtually no cultural opportunities when I went there, very little. So it was a, really an expanding experience for me and I came back a different person.

MJ: Did your perceptions of people in Maine or the Bates community change after you went to Harvard or did you have this perception prior to that?

PI: I think that my perception of people in Maine remained the same because it's the same today as it has always been. But my perception of Bates probably changed because I probably didn't realize how, (what is a good word?) how narrow Bates was when I went there. It was really a very different place. One of the reasons Bates had that kind of (what is the word? I'm not thinking of it), but had a particular cast was the fact that so many of the faculty that I had were men who were just completing their years at Bates. So they had really a lot of older men who had tenure and really, in retrospect, and I really came away from law school thinking that in retrospect they were sort of riding out their years. So they were wonderful to be with but I don't think that I got from them the kind of awareness that the Bates students get today. I know that I didn't get. . . . (*unintelligible phrase*); it's an entirely different kind of faculty, very different kind of faculty now than it was then.

MJ: In terms of Lewiston, Maine, how would you character-, or how do you characterize people in this community, beyond the Bates?

PI: Well of course it's a blue-collar community, you know, it is a classic mid nineteenth century New England textile town. Lewiston's like Biddeford, it's like Manchester, New Hampshire, it's like Central Falls, Rhode Island, it's like Pawtucket, Rhode Island, it's like Fall River, Mass, and I could go on. You take all of the old New England textile communities and they are blue-collar communities; very different kind of community than Portland which is a commercial

community, not a, a, an industrial community. Lewiston was called the industrial heart of Maine when I was a kid.

And so the bulk of the people were blue collar workers with, often with limited educations and often with limited educational goals, and too often with kind of an antipathy to education. They were suspicious of education; skeptical of education, maybe not suspicious but skeptical of education. And often affirmatively wouldn't provide it for their children, certainly after they reached whatever obligatory age was that you had to go to school. They didn't encourage it and the children that graduated Lewiston High School and went on to college in my time were far, far, far the exception. Today I don't know what the percentage is but it's very high.

So it's a very different kind of community, so it's a community that is pretty unsophisticated, skeptical, suspicious; I think "suspicious" is a fair term. And very narrowly, they have a very narrow viewpoint of things. Tended very often to be single-issue community and rarely I thought, or often did not see the big picture and didn't have an opportunity to see the big picture. Because this is where they came from; this is where they stayed. All they knew was really what they saw.

MJ: Now you alluded to a little bit of this in what you just described, but how would you characterize people in Lewiston from a political, economic and social perspective?

PI: Okay, let's take political. One, Lewiston traditionally has been a solid Democratic town. It isn't so much, it isn't by any means that that's so today. In the old days, what was called the "big box," when you would vote the straight ticket, (you can't vote straight tickets any more) but when you voted the straight ticket you could count on Lewiston to be, I've forgotten what the statistics are, but I think in the nineties where people would vote the straight Democratic ticket. So politically they were a dependable Democratic community. But that is formally. When I say formal I mean F-O-R-M-A-L, formally they're Democrats. But if you scratch the surface of them you won't find any of the liberalism that the term Democrat would imply for example in New York, it has, or maybe in, and certainly Massachusetts has an entirely different meaning. They were Democrats because they, it, by congregating as Democrats it gave them protection against the Republicans who they viewed as predominantly Protestant.

So I think in Lewiston it was really a question of their getting together and gaining political strength because they had no economic strength at all. The bosses that ran the mills were not, they weren't the bosses that ran the mills, and the entire mercantile communities, very, very few French-Canadian merchants as compared to non-French. And so this gave them strength. They got it through the Democratic Party; that avenue wouldn't be available to them with the Republican party because there were too many Republicans for them to have an impact. So they were Democrats by tradition for their, to further their own interests and were not Democrats because of any profound commitment to Democratic philosophy. And the fact of the matter is that Lewiston's always been a terrible labor town; very hard to get a union going here. Well, in a traditional Democratic town there shouldn't be much problem with unions and Lewiston has never been a good union town. The state of Maine has never been much of a union state. So, that, I think that probably answers the political question, you know. What else, you had some other, there were some other issues there.

MJ: Well, I was just wondering, would you describe them as conservative Democrats or just. . . .?

PI: Oh yes, definitely conservative, absolutely conservative. They're motivated by a French language radio station, (very conservative), motivated to a very considerable extent I think by a French language newspaper, (highly conservative), motivated by the church, again it's a very conservative institution and very conservative in its day. And this extends to the parochial schools which were enormously influential, and again these were run by people who really weren't broad in their outlook; they're very narrow in their outlook.

MJ: You said that they coalesced as Democrats to further their interests. What did you mean by that?

PI: Well in unity there's strength so that the. . . .

MJ: What were some of their interests?

PI: What would they want? They would want to get political control of the city and they were able to get political control of the city. If you've got political control, politics implies jobs. So in those days Lewiston didn't have a thousand employees but they probably had with the school system, they must have had five hundred, maybe even more, but perhaps five hundred employees. Well that's five hundred jobs, so that's a valid political goal. They have a public works department; I don't know how large it was in those days but maybe seventy-five people, maybe even more, so that's a valid political goal. They have a police department; I don't know how big it is today, I can't use comparative figures. But there must have been twenty-five to thirty policemen, twenty-five to thirty firemen, and if anything I'm underestimating it. Well these are all worthwhile political goals, I mean this is what, you know, to many people that's what politics is about. And if, you know, if you need to get a sewer on your street, it's very helpful to play the role in electing the people that are going to make the decision as to whether you're going to get a sewer, right?

MJ: Okay, moving on to economically, how would you, how are people in Lewiston economically different from other areas? How would you characterize. . . .?

PI: Than other areas?

MJ: Hmm.

PI: Not very different I think. The, now we're talking about the 1930s, the 19-, part of the 1940s, wages were still very low, people were extremely hard-working in those days. Those were two-worker families; I mean two-worker families is the norm today, it certainly wasn't the norm then. When I grew up none of my friends' mothers worked; it was very unusual for a mother to be working. But if you lived in a blue-collar family and worked in, and the family depended on either the mills or the shoe shops, or the "shops" as they were called, you had two-person, you had a two-person family. So you had to, two people had to work to make ends meet.

And they didn't have a lot of disposable, a lot of disposable cash. I mean, they really had to work hard just to support their family. So they were very hard working, extremely high quality of work, and very, very thrifty and very pious, exceedingly decent people. And it was a very good community in that sense. So you didn't have sophistication, you didn't have breadth of outlook, which was bad, very bad. But you had extremely good people which is very, very good, so you have two items; they don't ne-, I don't know whether they balance each other or not. In the long run perhaps not because Lewiston is still doing catch-up from fifty years of virtually no progress.

MJ: You mentioned shoe shops, were they very common? I realize the mills were.

PI: Oh yeah, the, I'm not sure which industry had the largest number of employees. I suppose the mills at full blast doing three shifts like during World War II, they would have had more employees because I can't believe that the shoe shops ran two shifts, certainly not locally because the local shoe shops made women's shoes. And so women's shoes were not a priority item during the World War II. Communities that made men's shoes were producing military shoes and they may have had two shifts or perhaps even more than that. The, I've kind of lost the track, what was the question?

MJ: I was asking you about the shoe shops and how. . . .

PI: Yeah, no, shoe shops were a major industry. If you take a look at the seal of the city of Auburn, (take a look at it if you can), and you'll see that there is a kind of circle composed of shoe lasts, the wooden forms on which shoes are made. Yeah, Auburn was a shoe city.

MJ: Oh, interesting.

PI: In fact, one of the best banks in Auburn up until it failed in the Depression was called the Shoe and Leather Bank.

MJ: Oh, really? Okay, so how are the people in Lewiston from the social perspective?

PI: Well, Lewiston again is a very interesting community in that sense because it is largely, not as much today by any means, but still largely a working class community and had almost no middle class, very small middle class, and no upper class at all. I mean, I grew up in Lewiston; I come from a middle-class family, and there were families that certainly had more money than my parents did. But I don't think that anybody, I don't think I grew up feeling that my family, you know, with my friends, were not kind of the social equals of anybody in town. We weren't necessarily the economic equals but the problem is in a community like Lewiston, I don't think you ever had an upper class that was both socio- and economically homogeneous because there weren't enough rich people in town for such a class. If there were people who considered themselves in that class I guess I really didn't know who they were, and they must have been a very small class.

The middle class was not large; it was disproportionately small compared to a city like Bangor which is great economic, which is a great mercantile commercial center, and certainly much,

much smaller than Portland. They are old communities. Bangor goes back to the 18th century, Portland goes back to the 17th century, so there were great aristocratic entrenched families that wielded tremendous power in those communities and in congregation had tremendous power in the state of Maine. I mean, these are the old Republican, old Yankee Republican families who had tremendous power then. They had the economic power and they used the economic power in political ways and they had the political power, too.

You didn't have that in Lewiston. In Lewiston you had essentially a Franco-American community; primarily immigrants, and we were probably as close to a classless community as you could find. It just seems to me that the, when I was going to school, the guys that I went around with, I hung out with, they could be anybody, could absolutely be anybody; it didn't make any difference.

MJ: How did your college and/or law school experiences shape your beliefs and attitudes and interests?

PI: I don't know that I can answer that. Well, yes I suppose I can to some way. College was a continuation of everything that I had done in life so it didn't change much of anything. I had gone to Hebron Academy which was a very traditional Freewill Baptist oriented prep school. I went to Bates College which was precisely the same, a very conservative church-oriented Freewill Baptist college. When I started Bates it actually had a Baptist minister as the president and he succeeded two other Baptist ministers.

MJ: Who was this?

PI: Clifton Daggett Gray was a minister. So when I went to Bates, Bates was very distinctly a Christian college. Everybody was automatically a member of the Christian Association, and the Christian Association was responsible for a certain amount of the social activity in the college. So Bates was very declared and certainly properly so. It was, Bates started out as a seminary called the Maine State Seminary, and it was, even a century later, it had very much that same cast. There was compulsory chapel, I've forgotten how many times we went but we certainly went at least four times a week, maybe even five times a week; it was obligatory. Couldn't cut chapel, attendance was taken to make sure that you were in chapel. I sang a lot of hymns, in both prep school and college.

Once I got to law school it was entirely different. A much more cosmopolitan student body and typically a lot of young men from New York who had very different attitudes, who were very liberal. They'd grown up in an entirely different tradition, they'd grown up in the tradition of labor. Their families were, came from a labor background and so the unions were a factor in their lives. Socialism absolutely was a factor in their lives. They dealt with their allegiance or lack of allegiance to socialism in college. There's no such thing here at Bates. It would have been anathema to call yourself a socialist, if anybody, if any student at Bates even knew what it meant.

So you get a much broader student body at law school. These were people that knew a great deal about culture in a very broad sense, they knew music and they knew dance, which was

something that certainly didn't exist at Bates. They knew art and sometimes very well. They were involved in these activities, so it was a much richer stew and we took advantage of what Boston had to offer and which Cambridge had to offer, which is a great deal.

MJ: How do you think-

PI: I mean Boston considered itself to be the hub of the universe and that's why it's called "the hub." And Boston was called, often, now no longer, well, I'm not even sure of that; you don't hear the expression any more, but Boston was the "American Athens," a seat of enlightenment and culture.

MJ: How do you think this "new stew," if you will, influenced you personally coming from Maine?

PI: At Bates, I mean at law school? Well, I came back to Lewiston a much more sophisticated person than when I started out. I don't mean to imply that when I went to law school I was a bumpkin; I really wasn't a bumpkin. I had been a naval officer for about two and a half years or more; I had spent, well almost a year, in China, traveled around. I had traveled in this country through the service; it gave me an opportunity to go in to New York frequently. I was stationed in Chicago for four months, stationed in Florida for I guess a couple of months, a month and a half; I can't remember exactly. I spent time in San Francisco and then traveled extensively in the Pacific and Hong Kong was a very extraordinary community in those days. Shanghai was indescribable. So when I did come back I did have a certain amount of polish. So by the time I got to law school, you know, I knew how to get on a subway train without falling into the tracks.

MJ: What kind of law did you study specifically?

PI: In law school? Well, again, in those days it isn't like it is now where you can do a lot of picking and choosing. There was no, there were no options in the first year of law school; everybody took certain basic courses. You don't even have to take all of those courses now. In the second year there were a few options but not much. In the third year maybe half the courses, no, maybe in the third year they were virtually all optional. But because I thought that the kind of law that I would practice would be the law involving businessmen, that I would probably represent businessmen and help them solve their problems, I took whatever courses I thought would be useful as a corporate commercial lawyer which is what I am.

MJ: Why did you choose to practice law in Lewiston?

PI: Well, again, my father was a lawyer; he had a successful law office. So I, it was, seemed like a very intelligent thing to do and it was.

MJ: So you became involved through your father?

PI: As a lawyer? Yeah, yeah, my father was a lawyer and so I came back, joined him, and I was a partner with my father for nearly twenty-five years.

MJ: Oh, really!

PI: We practiced together and the law firm grew and grew.

MJ: How do you think you influenced the community; what kind of role did you play?

PI: Well I'm considered to be a liberal in the community.

MJ: Really?

PI: I think in the early years when I came back from law school and got involved in politics, (and I got involved in politics right off), I was liberal and people would kind of laugh benevolently. I mean, it wasn't anything to be ashamed of. And it isn't until the Republicans in the, in my, at the time of the Bush administration made being a liberal, or tried to make being a liberal a dirty word. Certainly in the days of Kennedy it was a badge of pride and that was also true in the Johnson administration, also true in Jimmy Carter's administration, so it's a cyclical kind of thing.

So when I came back to Lewiston I was of course branded a liberal and I think everybody kind of was amused by it. But I had an impact on the community because as quickly as I could I got on the Lewiston Board of Finance. And I won't go into a long explanation of what that means except to say that we were the chief fiscal agents of the city. We spent the city's money and as someone who had liberal attitudes, I helped to break the preexisting political mold. I didn't do it all by myself but I worked hard at doing it.

MJ: Besides your father, who else did you work with?

PI: As, when I first started in?

MJ: Well, continued.

PI: Oh you mean in later years, oh, I see.

MJ: Sure, well, when you started off and then later on?

PI: Oh, I could give you a long list, but Judge Laurier Raymond who is still a partner of mine, Ronald Bissonette who is also, Larry Raymond, Laurier Raymond, he's from Lewiston; he's a life-long resident, Ronald Bissonette who is a life-long resident of Lewiston, Daniel D'Auteuil who is also a life-long resident of Lewiston. . . . So these are young men who come from the Lewiston community and we feel very strongly about the advancement of the community. There'd be other people but I'd have to think about, you know, which ones were influential.

MJ: Did you come back to Lewiston directly after Harvard Law?

PI: Yeah.

MJ: Okay. Besides your job, what other roles do you think you've played in the community? You mentioned the finance. . . .?

PI: Yes, I've been, I was, the very first thing that I did when I came back, I got involved in politics immediately and was named corporation counsel for the city of Lewiston and I was corporation counsel for four years. And that was a very influential role in the community because, you know. . . . This kind, it sounds a little strange. Corporation counsel's an appointed official, not an elected official; theoretically it's just a lawyer. But because the people who held elected office often had very limited backgrounds, (they may have had good functional backgrounds as politicians but they had limited educational backgrounds), corporation counsel, (this was not supposed to be so but pragmatically it was so), helped make policy. So I had four years as corporation counsel and then several years later I came back and was corporation counsel for one more year, so I had five in all. I had four years as assistant county attorney, but that's not making policy. So, that's just law enforcement and so on, that didn't play a role.

MJ: Did this, was this just Lewiston or was it Lewiston-Auburn or the whole area?

PI: The corporation counsel Lewiston only, assistant county attorney is the whole county but that's immaterial. And then I had twenty years on the Lewiston board of finance and those were very important years because they were the years in which the old charter went out and the new charter came in. So I had, I was able to play a role in that.

MJ: What are, you just mentioned the new charter; what are some of the most significant changes you've noticed over the years?

PI: Because of the charter or in the, within the charter?

MJ: Either, or both?

PI: Well, Lewiston, prior to the new charter (which isn't that new any more but let's call it the new charter), Lewiston had what's called a commission form of government. You're probably familiar with it, it is the poorest possible form of government in terms of efficiency. It is also the poorest possible form of government in terms of planning, in terms of the enlargement of community's vision. It's a piece, it's a keeper form of government that is used be-, that was used because of the dishonesty with the prior public officials. And there was so much dishonesty in the city that over a period of time the legislature came in and took the power away from the peo-, the power away from the elected officials because they had no confidence that the electorate would elect good, honest capable city officials. And they decided to strip them of their power and so they took the, what would be the conventional government, broke it up into divisions and said that each division would be run by a commission.

Well, that's not a very good way to do business. I mean a city is really a business that provides services; that's all it does, plows your sidewalk, collects your waste, it educates your children, puts out the fires in your home if you have a fire, gives you police protection: that's the function of a city. It's a, these departments are not mutually exclusive; they, their activities go across the lines all the time and so it's very important that they be coordinated and that they not be sniping

at one another, and that you don't have commissions trying to put down another commission and make a grab for power. And that's exactly what happened. So what you had was, you had almost an immaculately honest government because nobody, no one person, had really enough authority to, for anybody to try to bribe for example. And there were so many checks and double checks and triple checks built into the old charter that there was really almost no opportunity for dishonesty within the government so it was an immaculate government in that sense.

But it was utterly non-progressive; there was no planning whatsoever. It, all of the energy that the City Hall had was expended in just administering to these several commissions and that was all wasted energy, you know. Instead of doing something that would advance the city in a progressive sense, they had to work very, very hard just to do the regular administrative work required by all these boards.

MJ: When did the legislature revoke power from. . . .?

PI: The charter was the charter of 1939 I think. So in 193-, but it happened even before that because it, in a progressive way, before it absolutely got rid of the old, the original charter of the city, you know. . . . When I'm talking about the old charter I'm not talking about the original charter. The original charter was a conventional city government charter; you had a strong board, you had a strong board of mayor and aldermen. They ran the whole city: hired the police chief, hired the fire chief and so forth. But they got to be so corrupt that after a while the legislature took the police authority away from the board of mayor and aldermen and they put. . .

MJ: Away from whom, I'm sorry?

PI: It would be the board of mayor and aldermen: they took it away and they said you no longer have authority over the police. And so they appointed a commissioner who really ran the police department and he was a Bates professor. His name was Fred Pomeroy, and, the governor appointed the commissioner.

MJ: I need to stop the tape and turn it over.

End of Side One

Side Two

MJ: This is side two of the interview with Philip Isaacson. Okay, if you'd like to continue about the charter?

PI: Okay, so, the problem in the city of Lewiston was corruption. And so in order to stamp out corruption they set a caretaker form of government; the caretaker form lasted, I don't know, thirty years perhaps, sure, at least that long, longer. And it was non-progressive; there was really no centralization of authority planning, not even, yeah, no planning. And it just maintained the status quo, but in other communities there was a great deal of progress being made. You could look across the river to Auburn and see that Auburn had a city manager form of government; they had it for a very long time and they were planning for the future and they planned very well

for the future.

We could see some of the things happening in other communities, and finally the commission was instituted. And through referendum they threw out the charter, that is the second charter, the 1939 charter, and the charter we have today. Well now Lewiston's an entirely different community in that respect. We have centralized authority; a wonderful city administrator who is enormously capable and we're very, very fortunate to have him. He's not only foresighted but he's not afraid to take a stand and he will take stands on every issue that he feels is central to the advancement of the city. And he's a very bright and a person with extremely good civic values and extremely good values politically. Very good, we're lucky to have him. And he has a very good staff.

So we have an aggressive city hall; probably, we have a staff, just traditionally the City Hall staff was far superior to the elected officials. I don't know to what extent I could say that today. You never get the elected officials that you feel you're entitled to because you don't want to get out and run yourself. So you let somebody else do it. And, you know, if you're not willing, "If you're not part of the solution you are," as Lyndon Johnson said, "part of the problem." And so, that's what you have.

However, I feel that currently at least for the last ten years we have had the, one of the best governments that Lewiston probably ever had in its history except maybe in the years from, oh, I don't know, 1865 maybe to 1895, a period of Lewiston's great growth and expansion; obviously they had, must have had wonderful governments in those days. But we certainly have a very solid government today and as progressive as the voter, as the electorate will permit him to go.

MJ: Going back, way back actually, what was it like growing up in the Lewiston community?

PI: Oh, I think that's too broad a question. I don't know what it was like growing up. What was it like growing up in any community? You know, you grew up, you went to school. I will say this, this is kind of a philosophic observation: when I grew up we didn't think in terms of rights, we thought in terms of obligations. I grew up in a society that imposed obligations on people. In my own family structure, I came from an absolutely wonderful family. I nevertheless did not consider that I had certain rights as a member of the family; I understood very distinctly that I had obligations. When I went to school I had zero rights; none at all. I had obligations within the school system. When I went to Hebron I had no rights whatsoever. When I went to college it, my, yeah, when I was at Bates I didn't have any rights; I had obligations. When I went in the service, again, zero rights. When I went to law school, less than zero rights.

This notion of, (I had plenty of obligations), this notion of rights is a later development, a development that I think came out of the sixties. And now my grandchildren, you know, they assert their rights; they don't stamp their feet and say I have these rights, but they nevertheless through their actions make it very clear that they consider that they have rights. It's the obligation of their parents to explain that they also have duties. I see the Bates students as having tremendous rights; I think that's very much in the forefront of their minds, their rights. Well, society has changed.

(Tape stopped.)

MJ: What did you do socially in Lewiston growing up?

PI: I don't know what I did socially.

MJ: Don't remember?

PI: No, I mean, I did all the standard things. I was a Cub Scout, I was a Boy Scout, I was a member of a model airplane club, I'm very enthusiastic and remain a very enthusiastic skier and I am, I'm pretty much of a mountain hiker. In fact even though I'm seven-, almost seventy-five years old, on Saturday I'm going out to climb into Tuckerman's Ravine on Mt. Washington. This will be pretty good if I can, if I make it.

So we did a great deal. The Boy Scouts played a big role, and we were involved with something with the Boy Scouts every single week, and in the summer I actually went to Scout camp. And that played a big role. Cub Scouts played a big role, and religious activities played a big role. I'm Jewish and in those days there was a very good-sized Jewish community; there's a very small Jewish community now. There was a good-sized Jewish community which meant that there were all kinds of Jewish activities. And there are almost none now. So there was a, the Boy Scout troop for example was sponsored by a Jewish organization, so was the Cub Scouts.

MJ: Were there many synagogues in town?

PI: There always have been two, there still are. But the size of the Jewish community shrunk drastically. I don't think it's a third of the size that it was when I was a kid. So a lot of the social activities revolved around the, revolved around the synagogue. Also, being Jewish I had to go to Hebrew school, which meant that for five years from the time I was eight to thirteen (is that five? Yeah), three days a week after school I went to Hebrew school for two hours and every Sunday morning, so I didn't have a lot of spare time. And I skied on Saturdays, so I was kind of busy.

MJ: Sounds like it. Who were some of the people involved in the social events that you can remember who were, who really. . . .

PI: In my own life, you mean?

MJ: Played a role in the community or in your life?

PI: I'm trying to think of who would be involved in the greater community. It would be hard to say that it would be anybody but teachers because that was the common ground, the schools. After schools we just made our own social groups and they were pretty cosmopolitan; they could come from absolutely anywhere. They didn't, there were times in my life when they tended to be more Jewish than not because I was preparing for *Bar Mitzvah* and so were a lot of other boys and we would see each other a lot. But it wasn't exclusively so by any means and certainly after I was thirteen. Again, it was a very cosmopolitan community, my friends came from every part

of town and every area of life. I mean, I had some, I had friends whose parents worked in the mills, you know, and I had friends whose parents owned the mills, and everything in between. So in that sense it was a, it was a, it wasn't, there never is an egalitarian community but, (far from it I suppose), but my own social experience was pretty cosmopolitan. Good, very rich.

MJ: Were there any social clubs that revolved around politics at all?

PI: Yeah, there were social clubs that revolved around politics. For example, one of the clubs was called the Club *Franco-Americain*, or in English, the Franco-American Club, and they were the Republican club. That's, were the, that was the seat of French Republican strength in the community. It wasn't very strong because there weren't many of them, but anyhow that certainly was one. The Montagnard was a, (we used to call them "snowshoe clubs"), but the Montagnard, the Seur Canadien, the, not music and literary, but the Seur Canadien, I think the Club Jacques Cartier, Les Ironnelles which was made up of women, the Acme Aroostook Club- I'm naming you a group of clubs that were associated in a federation that called itself Les Racqueteurs, The Snowshoe Boys. So it would be an American-Canadian association. And they were little centers, not so little in some cases, but they were centers of Franco-American power and they were all Democratic strongholds. Sure.

MJ: Okay great, well, thank you very much Mr. Isaacson.

PI: It's a great pleasure.

MJ: And hopefully we'll get to do a follow-up.

PI: Yeah, we can, yeah we can continue it if, I guess the stuff I've given you is worth getting, and I like doing it. It's kind of an oral history; yeah, it's terrific, so these things, yeah, these things get saved because. . . . And I hadn't thought about it in that sense until you began to ask me about who else would you interview and I began to realize that I was young when a lot of the people that I dealt with were sort of finishing their careers. When the new people came in, they came in with different attitudes. So a lot of people with those old attitudes, you know; there aren't so many of them around to talk to.

MJ: Thank you very much.

PI: A pleasure.

End of Interview

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