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Ives, Edward D. "Sandy" oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

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Interview with Edward D. “Sandy” Ives by Andrea L’Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Ives, Edward D. “Sandy”

Interviewer

L’Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

August 27, 2000

Place

Bucksport, Maine

ID Number

MOH 226

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Biographical Note

Edward D. “Sandy” Ives was born September 4, 1925, and grew up in White Plains, New York. He was an anthropology professor at the University of Maine, Orono and founded the Maine Folklife Center, where information was collected on the early 20th century lumber industry in Maine. He is the author of “The Tape Recorded Interview,” a directorial guide on oral history, in both book and video formats. He wrote and sang the song “Vahlsing Pollutes It,” referring to the failed sugar beet industry in Aroostook County. At the time of this interview he lived in Bucksport, Maine.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: growing up in White Plains, New York; Maine and Muskie; “Does everyone look like Muskie in Maine” story; Maine Folklife Center; “Vahlsing Pollutes It” song; Prestile Stream and the sugar beet industry; and the Great Depression.

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Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Mr. Sandy Ives on August the 27th, the year 2000, at his home in Bucksport, Maine. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could I start by just asking you to give me your full name and spelling it?

Sandy Ives: Yes, my name is Edward, Edward Dawson Ives, I-V-E-S. I think the rest of it is clear enough on how to spell it.

AL: And how did you get the nickname Sandy?

SI: When I was a little kid in the crib evidently I was bald, absolutely bald, and as my hair started to come in it was reddish and it looked like grains of sand, my father said. And he started just calling, saying, "Hi Sandy," you know, and it stuck.

AL: Great. And where and when were you born?

SI: September 4th, 1925.

AL: And did you grow up in Maine?

SI: No, no, no, no, I'm a rootless suburbanite. I grew up in White Plains, New York.

AL: Oh, what was it like growing up there in the -?

SI: Well, I had a very, very pleasant childhood. I grew up in a neighborhood of fifty by a hundred plots, let's say, that sort of thing. And, well, I can't think of any way really to answer your question more specifically.

AL: Let me ask it this way: religiously, politically, socially, what was the town like? Economically, too?

SI: Well, White Plains is, is and was one of the wealthier suburbs of New York City. It was the heart of Westchester County, the county seat and all that. Politically it was quite conservative. I mean, during my childhood I remember the 1932 election. We, a bunch of us set up a polling place on the street which was a milk bottle, and started asking our friends, you know, who they were going to vote for, or who they thought of, who they thought should win, you know. And some of them wouldn't tell us, but they'd drop their little ticket, little piece of paper into the milk bottle, and we'd see that they were voting for Roosevelt and we'd beat 'em up. So it was a landslide for Herbert C. Hoover, you might say, in the neighborhood. But it was a very conservative, we all were, my parents were conservative people and so on, although my father did admit that he did vote for Roosevelt, I think, in 1936. I'm not sure. Yeah.

AL: And what were your parents' names and what did they do for an occupation?

SI: My mother's name was Millicent Clarissa Dawson. She came from Syracuse, New York, she was a housewife. My father, Warren Livingston Ives, grew up in Minnesota, St. Peter, Minnesota, and ultimately graduated from Gustavus Adolphus College there and then went, two year a Princeton and then went on to a life of selling. He worked for Clewett, Peabody & Co. in New York, selling collars and shirts and that sort of thing, and kept that up for quite some time. Then he became very sick and could no longer take the life on the road and got a job locally, and spent the rest of his life as a real estate man in White Plains.

AL: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

SI: I had one sister, she was a, Ruth went on to Bennington and became a very fine singer but she never made it to the big time, let's say. She spent the, a good part of her life, she never married, spent a good part of her life working as fashion director for D. Altmann & Company and died about, when was it, I can never remember the exact date but around 1975 or '76. My old-, she was older than I by eight years, which sort of meant that I had two mothers.

AL: And, so you were politically interested at a very young age, sort of?

SI: I wouldn't call it that, I wouldn't call it politically interested. That was just a game we were playing. The idea, in that little neighborhood where I grew up the idea of anybody actually voting for Roosevelt was almost beyond comprehension. Although there were a couple of people in the neighborhood, there was a teacher next door for whom my family had great respect, and he was a Roosevelt man. He felt something had to be done, and that was that.

AL: So you went to schools in White Plains, New York?

SI: Yes, yeah I did, I began there and then I went on to a private school, got a scholarship to a private school in Massachusetts, the Cambridge School. I went there for two years.

AL: And then where did you attend college?

SI: Well, I first attended college at Colgate University, but that was through the Marine Corps V-12 program which was an officer training program during the war, which. They had the foolish idea that stuck around for quite some time, that an officer must be a gentleman and gentlemen go to college, and therefore they would send us to college for the equivalent of two years in a year, and we would then go on to officer candidate school and all of that. And I did, and I flunked out of officer candidate school on August 28th, 1945, yeah.

AL: Aha, so the 55th anniversary of that will tomorrow?

SI: Something like that, yes, and I will remember it. One of the best things that ever happened to me.

AL: And so where did you go from there?

SI: Oh, I did duty up and down the east coast, winding up in the Washington Navy yard. That was it. It was a very unexciting, uneventful Marine Corps career.

AL: And how did you end up in Maine?

SI: Well, as a child, my wonderful sister, when she was asked to come up to Maine and visit her boyfriend's family who had a summer place in Small Point, she said she'd like to bring her little brother along. Can you imagine that? But she did, that's the kind of girl Ruth was. And I came up and loved Maine, of course. And then one summer, 1942, I was a, what they used to call a CIT, a counselor in training, at a children's camp down in Alamoosook Lake here outside of Bucksport. And that was my experience.

And why did I, how did I get to Maine? Well, I was teaching and also at that time I was going to, I had come back to Columbia to work on a doctorate in literature and ran out of money, just plain ran out of money. There was Bobby and me and our son, and I had to get a job somewhere. So I wrote around to over a hundred colleges and universities, and Maine came through, offered me a job.

AL: What year was this?

SI: Nineteen fifty-five.

AL: So you, you, and then you stayed there through your whole career?

SI: I stayed at the univer-, well, I had taught elsewhere before that, but I spent, yeah, I was here for forty, as I say it was forty-four years altogether.

AL: And so you came to Maine when Ed Muskie had just become governor.

SI: Muskie had just become governor and everybody thought it was remarkable, of course, that a Democrat could win in the state of Maine. By that time, by the way, my politics were quite liberal. At least in my thinking about it. I was never, have never been an activist myself, but you know, I read *The Nation* and things like that, let's say, so.

AL: So you'd become more liberal over the years.

SI: Yeah, I don't know that I was ever terribly conserva-, I guess I was, I don't know. I just didn't think politically very much, that's all.

AL: So can you tell me about some of the interesting people that you've met and heard stories about over the years?

SI: Oh my God, no, you'd have to, you'd have to come at me with specific questions there because I can't, I couldn't answer that, it's too broad a question for me.

AL: Okay, are there certain Maine politicians that you've met over the years who struck you as interesting that you've heard or told stor-- ?

SI: I have met very few politicians, to tell you the truth. I think the only governor, well, let's see, I met Ken Curtis and I liked him. I met, oh, what the devil was his name, the guy who preceded John Reed, he was a Demo--, Clauson, no, no, no.

AL: Clauson?

SI: Clauson, Clauson, yeah.

AL: Clint Clauson, yeah.

SI: I met him about a week before he died.

AL: How did you meet him?

SI: I was singing at a gathering of, I forget, it's the Women's Clubs of Maine or something like that were having a thing and they asked me to come and put on a program of songs. I used to do that, I used to go around with my guitar and put on programs for different groups. It helped me bring my salary up almost to the poverty level.

AL: So, did you ever meet Muskie?

SI: Never did. I knew his son, Steve. Steve was a student at the University [of Maine, Orono] and I knew him there and liked him. But I never met his father and I was always very sorry, I wanted to meet him, I had a story I wanted to tell him.

AL: What was that?

SI: Well, I can't remember exactly when this was but I, in the American Folklore Society, my professional organization, I'm definitely known as the guy from Maine, no question about that. And if anything, if I sang anything, let's say that is applicable, somebody would say, oh, "What can you expect from an old Downeaster like you." And, you know, I'd answer something like, "You're geezely right, you old Christer," or something like that, you know. That would be the game we'd play. But one day I remember at a cocktail party, a couple of guys came up to me and said, "Sandy, God dammit, does everybody in Maine look like Muskie?" I said, "What, me?" you know. But I always wanted to tell him that I was not insulted by that. But I never got the chance. And that's, I was sorry, I would have liked to have met him.

AL: Well tell me how the Folklore Center at the University of Maine started and grew.

SI: Well, it started because I started, first of all I used to go around, as I say, and do these programs of songs. I was a folk singer and had been for years. And people started asking me about certain songs, you know, and I'd say, gee, I don't know that, *The Jam on Gary's Rock* or something like that, old lumber wood songs, I didn't know any of them. So I had to learn them and I got very, very interested in them and began following up on them. And I got interested in how such songs came to be made, why did people make up songs, what did they make them up about and so on. And I got interested in certain song makers, there were people who were well known in the lumber woods for their ability to make up a song, let's say, that kind of thing. And so I began writing a biography of this man, Larry Gorman, who was known far and wide back in the early years of this century as the man who makes the songs.

And so I just got into that, and the next thing you know I'm head over heels into folklore rather than into English and I begin teaching courses in folklore. And my students would do papers and so on, make wonderful collections of material and bring them in, and so the next thing you know you got an archives without even half trying. And it grew from there, let's say. And actually you can probably, I think some of the literature that the Folklore, the Folklife Center puts out would have better explanations of it than I can give you right now.

AL: So there are collections of songs and then there are also oral histories?

SI: Oh, my goodness, yes.

AL: And storytelling?

SI: Oh yes, very definitely. There are, there are thousands of hours of material there. Chris Beam knows all about it.

AL: I think I asked you, or I hope I asked you this before, if you remembered the song *Vahlsing Pollutes It*.

SI: Of course I remember it, I wrote it.

AL: Yeah. And if there was anyway you might recite it or sing it for me today.

SI: Well, I will, yes, but as I say, I really, my memory may be faulty in a couple of places, but really I, I don't know much about it beyond the, beyond what it says. I mean I, I made the thing up, I really don't know now, at this point, what part Muskie played in that whole drama. It seems to me that he, as I remember now, that he supported Vahlsing's attempts to open up this huge sugar beet refinery up there, but, you know, that was some years ago when I did that and so I, if you ask me to explain some of the details in it I might have trouble. I believe I explained some of them in that letter that I wrote to you.

AL: Yes, yeah.

SI: About what happened, that the people down in Mars Hill had just built themselves a sewage treatment plant and now the river was declassified from C to D and they'd wasted a lot of money and so on. Well, at any rate. No, I'll be glad to sing the thing over for you. You know the tune, you know the, you know where the tune comes from?

AL: I'm not sure because I haven't heard it, so.

SI: Well, there is an Australian song written by one [Andrew Barton] Banjo Paterson [1864-1941] called Waltzing Matilda. And I just remember knowing the name Vahlsing, waltzing, you know, it was too damn good to miss, had to do something with that. And it grew from that seed, let's say.

Once an Aroostook farmer, sat by his potato patch,
Counting his pennies, one, two, three.
When along came Muskie, and told him of the sugar beet,
Saying Vahlsing will build it for you and for me.

Vahlsing will build it, Vahlsing will build it
Vahlsing will build it for you and for me.
And he sang as he talked of the sugar beet refinery,
Vahlsing will build it for you and for me.

Down in Augusta, Vahlsing told the governor
There's a little matter of Prestile Stream.
And the boys in the legislature sang as they declassified
Vahlsing pollutes it for you and for me.

Vahlsing pollutes it, Vahlsing pollutes it,
Vahlsing pollutes it for you and for me.
And the boys in the legislature sang as they declassified,
Vahlsing pollutes it for you and for me.

Oh the sugar beet refinery is going like a house afire,

Meanwhile the smell helps to keep Maine green.
And the folks down in Mars Hill and across the line in Centerville,
Say Vahlsing pollutes it for you and for me.

Vahlsing pollutes it, Vahlsing pollutes it,
Vahlsing pollutes it for you and for me.
We can grow sugar beets right in our new sewage plant,
Vahlsing pollutes it for you and for me.

And that's it.

AL: Ya-a-a-a-. Oh, thank you. That was sort of, did you know Freddy Vahlsing or did you just pick up on the stories?

SI: I never laid eyes on the man in my life. But I know that he came here, moved from New York, The Montezuma Sugar Co. as I recall. There's a good little book on that, by the way, by a fellow by the name of Gould Colman, C-O-L-M-A-N of Cornell, all about Vahlsing and the Montezuma sugar refinery business. You might, somebody might be interested in that. It's not a very well published thing, it's more of a pamphlet, fifty, seventy-five pages, something like that. And I don't know, somebody ought to be able to find it easily enough. But no, I never met Mr. Vahlsing and he was quite an operator, though, there's no question about that. He charmed the birds out of the trees. And as I say, I, the only thing I could tell you beyond that about the song was that in 19B, what, seventy, '68, '69, somewhere in there, I finally got Pete Seeger to come up here and put on a program. And we were having supper down at my house before the program and, I can't remember how it came up but I said, "Oh yeah, there's a song about that," and I sang this thing to him. And Pete was delighted with it, and he said, "Hey, would you get up on the stage and sing that with me tonight?" And I says, "Oh, well, well, sure," you know, yeah, and I finally, I did. And it was quite an experience. The song got around a little. I believe I also mentioned that Pete and, what's his name, Don McLean?

AL: The man who sang American Pie?

SI: American Pie, yeah. They put together a little book of protest songs or whatever you want to call them, you know, and I remember Pete calling and asking if he could put that song in and I said, "Sure, go ahead," you know. What the hell, I didn't care. But, and Bill Bonyan who used to do a lot of singing around the state here, evidently, excuse me, sang it in some programs that he did. But outside of that, that's all I can tell you about it.

AL: Were there any other issues over the time that you, like, or maybe, what sort of things inspired you to write songs?

SI: That, the, I don't know which came first but that catchy Vahlsing-waltzing thing really just seemed like somebody ought to do something with that. And I was kind of, I never believed that the sugar beet refinery was going to do what Mr. Vahlsing said it was going to do. So I was always a little pissed off at the whole deal somehow. It seemed like we had, the state had been taken. And I don't think there's much doubt about that now. I don't know, I haven't followed

the thing at all.

AL: Well the good news is everything they built is, at that time, is being utilized by the potato industry and two other industries, so all the things they built didn't go to waste, fortunately.

SI: That's nice, yeah. But that's, as I say, that's all I know about it. It was a, and what inspired me to, oh, I don't know. I've written very few songs in my life. That one just came along, there it was and I wrote it.

AL: You said you met Ken Curtis and you liked him. Do you, do you -?

SI: Well I, just personally, you know, we, I can't remember where now that I met him. I think it was some event up here at the university, and he was there and I was there, and we talked for a few minutes, that was all.

AL: Did you learn a lot about Maine history being part of the Folklife Center?

SI: Oh, goodness, yes, I certainly did, yeah.

AL: Do you have any -?

SI: But it was mainly having to do with the lumber industry and that sort of a thing.

AL: Were there other professors at the University of Maine that you worked with in that area?

SI: Oh well, yes, there were dozens of them really who have been influential in my life, whose material I had read or I've talked to them and so on, that sort of thing. Jim Acheson of the anthropology department is certainly one of the primary ones. His work on lobster fishing here in the state has just been wonderful. There are others, I really can't-

AL: How about David C. Smith?

SI: Oh David, oh sure, David and I have always been good friends and we've played off each other for years, you might say. So, yeah, Dave's a good friend. Have you talked to David?

AL: Well, he was one of my professors, I was a history major at the University of Maine, Orono, so, and I think he's someone that might be important to talk to about Maine history, and.

SI: David would be good to talk to, David will always talk to you. And he might, he might really know something. He didn't just make up a song, he probably knows something about what went on.

AL: Yeah. I want to go back to the 1930s when you were in White Plains, New York. And it was Depression area, I mean it was the Depression era, but in your area did you feel it at all, being economically of the upper levels?

SI: Not particularly. I mean, I'd know that things had happened. For instance, I can remember my mother telling me that a very serious thing has happened in the United States, the banks have closed. Well that didn't mean anything to me particularly. I, here I was, what would I have been, six or seven maybe at the most, and I didn't understand what that was all about. But there was never any immediate effect.

The one effect that I can think of is tramps. We lived near to a railroad and we got a lot of tramps coming around to the house, you know, looking for a handout and that sort of thing. And that was that. I also remember at one point my mother telling me they were putting in a new sewer down the back road. And she, I remember told me one day, I, we, the kids used to like to go down and watch, you know, I mean there was a, there were steam shovels and rollers and all kinds of great stuff, you know, for kids to go down and watch. And we used to like to go down there and watch and I was told that I couldn't go down there, there are strikers down there. I had no idea what a striker was. All I could imagine was somebody with a club, you know, going around hitting people. And I never really thoroughly understood what that was all about. But I didn't go down, it didn't sound like a good idea. But things like that, yes, and when.

It, I never missed a meal, you know, I mean, it did not mean a great deal to us in our neighborhood. I knew one or two men in the neighborhood who had lost their jobs but somehow or other they seemed to find others. This was, these were people who were, what would we call them today, middle rank executives, let's say, people who had what my mother would have called a very fine position with the phone company or something like that, you know. They were middle level executives and so on. It was not a working, there wasn't a blue collar family in the neighborhood. These were the neighborhood of fifty by a hundred plots, as I said. Where are you from, now?

AL: I grew up in Farmington, I live in Auburn.

SI: Oh, all right, any of the good side streets in Farmington, the perfect example, say a fifty by a hun-, every, just a whole street full of fifty by a hundred plots, on every plot a house, in every house a mother, on every mother an apron. That was reality. And so I can't say that the Depression affected me much. I didn't know, I knew there was a Depression and it was a bad thing, but none of my friends went hungry. I almost feel deprived because it didn't, because when I look back on it I can't tell stories of, of bread lines and.

That was an interesting thing, by the way. When I taught one oral history course one year we used the Depression, women's place in the Depression as a theme. And I got, a friend of mine, Rita Bretton was her name, she was a graduate student in history, she may have, you may have known her, I don't know. Rita was working in the archives at the time and I said, "Hey look, give us a couple of lectures on the Depression and its effects," and she did. And she talked about the unemployment and the National Recovery Act, oh well, you know the drill. And then the students went out to interview people about the Depression. They came back and they were really kind of pissed off, they said, "Nobody, everybody keeps saying, 'oh, it wasn't so bad, we always had enough to eat, you know, it wasn't so bad'." "Yeah, there were a lot of, you know, there were a lot of unemployment, you know, we always had enough and always had a job and so on." And they were disappointed because they didn't find what the, the new reels had, let us

say, had given the, given them to expect to find. And that would be similar to my own experience as a kid, you know, it was, you know, we knew they were bad times and so on but we all, in our neighborhood we all got along just fine, had enough to eat, and so on. So it was that kind of a deal.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think would be important to add either in terms of oral histories?

SI: I'm sorry?

AL: Either in terms of doing oral histories or Maine history, or?

SI: Well I could go on forever about that. But, you know, I've taught, I've taught oral history and folklore fieldwork, that sort of thing, for many, many years and I could go on forever about that. But you can look it up, I don't know whether you've ever seen my book, The Tape Recorded Interview.

AL: I don't know that I have; I've read Donald Ritchie's book.

SI: Chris will know about it. What's that?

AL: I've read Donald Ritchie's book.

SI: Oh, Donald Ritchie's book? Oh yeah, sure, yeah.

AL: But I will look for your book, definitely.

SI: Yeah, it came out, I think the last edition of it was 1995, I don't think, I don't know if I have a copy of it here or not. No, I don't, I have it upstairs, of course. But University of Tennessee Press brought it out, and it's been quite, quite popular and used it all the time here. And, you know, so.

AL: Well great, thank you very much.

SI: I'll make one question. Why do you use a plug in? Why don't you use batteries?

AL: Oh, we have them as a back up.

SI: I'd use them the other way around.

AL: Okay.

SI: I noticed all the trouble you had to go through poking around (*unintelligible phrase*), all of that stuff.

Woman's voice: But she has no problem, dear, bending over.

SI: No, she did it fine, but -

End of Interview