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Johnson, Mary Ellen (Kiah) oral history interview

Don Nicoll

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Interview with Mary Ellen (Kiah) Johnson by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Johnson, Mary Ellen (Kiah)

Interviewer

Nicoll, Don

Date

March 22, 2004

Place

Brewer, Maine

ID Number

MOH 431

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Biographical Note

Mary Ellen Johnson was born on August 22, 1948 in Bangor, Maine to Richard Albert Kiah and Madelin Frances (Jones) Kiah. Her mother's father and uncle, Billy and Garfield Jones, were very active Democrats in the Millinocket area. Her mother involved her in local and national politics extensively during her childhood. Her father became active too, serving as mayor of Brewer at one time. She graduated from the University of Maine, Orono in 1970. At the time of this interview she was teaching.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: politics in the family; 1954 Maine gubernatorial campaign; 1958 Senate campaign; anecdote about Eleanor Roosevelt; "Uncle Garf" Garfield Jones; 1956 Democratic State Convention; Democratic National Convention; 1960 presidential campaign; 1968 vice presidential campaign; and the 1980 Senate campaign.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: It is Monday, the 22nd of March, 2004. We are at 74 Parkway North in Brewer,

Maine at the home of Mary Ellen and Mike Johnson. Don Nicoll is interviewing Mary Ellen. Mary Ellen, would you give us your full name, and your date of birth and place of birth?

Mary Ellen Johnson: My name is Mary Ellen Kiah Johnson. I live at 74 Parkway North, Brewer, Maine, and my birth date is 8/22/48 and I was born in Bangor, Maine at Eastern Maine Medical Center.

DN: And your father and mother were?

MEJ: My father was Richard A. Kiah, Richard Albert Kiah, and my mother was Madelin Frances Jones Kiah.

DN: And how do you spell Kiah?

MEJ: K-I-A-H.

DN: And Madelin?

MEJ: M-A-D-E-L-I-N, she was very concerned about that.

DN: And your first name is all one word?

MEJ: No, two words.

DN: Two words, Mary Ellen, E-L-L-E-N.

MEJ: Yes.

DN: And where did you go to school?

MEJ: I went to the local Brewer schools, graduated from Brewer High School and the University of Maine.

DN: And what was your major at Maine?

MEJ: Elementary education, speech therapy.

DN: Now your mother was very active in Democratic politics, and through her you met some of the leading lights of the Democratic Party in the fifties and sixties.

MEJ: Yes, I did.

DN: When did you first, when do you first recall seeing Senator Muskie?

MEJ: I think the first time was probably at a grange supper. My mother was very active in organizing the Penobscot County at first, and I believe it would have been at a grange supper,

maybe. I can't remember actually which one, but we danced all, my brother and I danced and we danced all over Penobscot County, and we were kind of the act that went before the speech to entertain people and keep them happy and organized. And it was, I remember him, he was very tall and a very nice looking man and he was always very friendly and down to earth and, you know, just seemed like he was a nice man.

DN: And your mother was deeply involved in that campaign?

MEJ: Yes, she was. She, she had, the family had always been very good Democrats throughout, from as far back as I can understand from their, through her people in Millinocket, and when she came to Brewer.

DN: Did she grow up in Millinocket?

MEJ: Yes, she was born and brought up in Millinocket and then came to [Orono and the University of Maine and transferred to] Bangor to go to Maine School of Commerce which is now Husson College, and graduated from there [because she was going to go back to Millinocket and run the family business].

(Telephone interruption)

DN: We were talking about your mother and the fact that she grew up in Millinocket.

MEJ: Yes, she, my mother grew up in Millinocket, graduated from Stearns High School in Millinocket, [spent two years at UMO], and then came to Maine School of Commerce in Bangor, which is now Husson College, and graduated from Maine School of Commerce and married my father, and then moved to Brewer.

DN: Was your father from Bangor?

MEJ: My father was from Brewer. And it was very funny because when she came to vote in Brewer for the first time, to register to vote, it was Election Day. And she went to a register, and my father had already gone, he worked at the *Bangor Daily News*, and my father had already gone and registered and voted and had gone to work, walked to work. This was in 1938. And at that point in time, my mother went to vote and they said to her, they handed her a Republican ballot, because you had the Big Box back then and you voted straight, one way ticket. And she said, "Oh no, I'm a Democrat." And they're like, "Oh, no, you can't be a Democrat, your husband's a Republican." And she said, "Oh no, you've got that wrong, my husband's a Democrat. I'm a Democrat and he's a Democrat." And they said, "Oh no, he just voted Republican. He works at the *Bangor Daily News*, he has to be a Republican." And my mother was absolutely horrified.

DN: This was the first time she knew?

MEJ: Oh yes. And so she came home and when he got home she told him, because he must have gone to work early in the morning, and when he came home she told him if he didn't go

back and re-register as a Democrat she wasn't going to let him back in the house. So from that time on she, there were only like twelve Democrats in Brewer at the time, and then she tried to find out who was the Democrat in charge in Brewer. And as it turned out she found Everett Millett who was from Ireland to begin with, and he came, he had been on the city council in Bangor and he was a Democrat, and he helped her organize Brewer to have some sort of a Democratic Party in Brewer. And then she later met Bob Baldacci and Pat Campbell and some other people that helped campaign with her.

DN: You remember Democratic activities around the house from a very early age.

MEJ: Absolutely.

DN: Tell me about your mother's family. What did her father do?

MEJ: My grandfather Jones worked in the mill at the Great Northern Paper Company. And before that, before he was married, he played big league baseball and played for the Boston Braves, and he was the second Maine man that ever went from Maine to the big leagues. He played in 1909, '10 and '11 with the Boston Braves. And so then he, his father died and he came back here. His father had typhoid fever, and he came back here and then married my grandmother. And my grandmother . . . My grandfather Jones, Billy Jones, he had a brother, Garfield Jones, and they were very, they were like two years apart and they were very, very close. And he married, Billy Jones married my grandmother Mary Ellen Lenehan, and Garfield Jones married her sister, Gertrude Louise Lenehan, so the brothers married sisters, in the same month I might add. That must have been quite a time.

So they were very active in politics in Millinocket, and I can remember my grandfather Billy Jones was, he started the first Elks Club up there, and the Knights of Columbus. And he had been away from Maine and seen what it was like. He had the first movie theater, we had the first movie projector from Millinocket, so they brought a lot of things into the town, and they also ran an insurance agency. And my Uncle Garf seemed to get more involved in the political end of it, and he was great friends with Franklin Delano Roosevelt and somehow, I don't know how he met him, through whatever, hunting or fishing or whatever because they were great sportsmen and they used to take, guide people up Mt. Katahdin and whatever.

DN: Your Uncle Garfield was the, your great Uncle Garfield was the guide?

MEJ: Yeah, oh yes, and so anyway Uncle Garf used to go quite often, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt would come to go up to Campobello he'd call Uncle Garf and Uncle Garf would go up to Campobello with him. And so when my mother was a little girl she had hot dogs on the lawn at Campobello, you know, so the family had always been Democrats. And then in the early fifties I think it was, Uncle Garf was made postmaster in Millinocket, Franklin Roosevelt made him postmaster in Millinocket. Oh, it must have been before that, because he died.

DN: It was long before that.

MEJ: Yeah, so it had to have been in the forties, before he died, I'm pretty sure he was the one

that put him in as postmaster, but it was somehow through Franklin Roosevelt that he got it.

DN: Now, with all that background, your mother had an obvious interest in politics and as you say she worked on organizing a committee in Brewer with Everett Millett and Pat Campbell. Bob Baldacci was in Bangor, of course. When you met Ed Muskie he was running for governor in '54, and you and Paul [Kiah] were dancing. What kind of dancing did you do?

MEJ: Well, we did tap dancing, and I was eight years younger than Paul so I was very tiny. In 1954 I'd have been about six years old, so Paul would have been about fourteen, and we did all sorts of little tap dancing around. We danced in Symphony Hall even, you know, we were pretty good at the time. And that was a good act to put before people to keep them interested at the time. When I think about it now, that would draw a crowd, when you had some entertainment. And people were used to that sort of thing; if they went out to the grange they had the fiddler or whatever. But if they, you know, they also brought along somebody else, oh yeah, well, I've got a politician.

Well, back in those times when I was five years old, that was when Ed Muskie was running for governor, and I didn't get to go to school because my birthday was in August and I didn't get to go to school for two or three weeks because, I believe the election was in September then?

DN: That's right.

MEJ: So I didn't get to go to school because my mother was out campaigning up through, all through the county, Penobscot County. And so Razor Crossman, who was an auctioneer and a very interesting man, he had money and he had a car, but he also knew all the farmers in all of Penobscot County. And so my mother hooked up with Razor Crossman and he drove her all around and we visited all the farms. And they had a sound system that they put on top of the car and they would play, you know, 'vote for Ed Muskie', 'vote for Ed Muskie', and all that.

But also, something humorous, I think to entertain me because I'd be riding in the back seat. And I can remember Razor Crossman always had a cigar in his mouth and I just couldn't stand the smell of the cigar smoke, but I think to entertain me every once in a while he would turn on the radio. And they'd be riding along and they'd play the radio, and the sound would pour out and the cows would hear the music and those cows would start running trying to chase the car. Well, then they had to stop it because the farmers would get mad because the cows thought it was time to go to be milked. And the farmers were saying, "You're going to ruin my cows' milk, it's going to turn to butter." So it was really funny, but that's how they started out.

DN: We should note here that Mr. Crossman's first name was Raynor, R-A-Y-N-O-R, but he was always known as Razor, R-A-Z-O-R.

MEJ: And he was a cattleman, a cattle auctioneer person. And so anyway, Razor was, I think he was instrumental in helping mum to go to the grange halls. And my uncle always, my Uncle Garf always belonged to the grange so they would go to the grange halls and hold these meetings, and that's when Muskie came and he would visit. He'd go, you know, they went door-to-door to these people. And he would go to the grange hall and then meet everybody; they'd get

them to come.

So, also they went to the fairs, and the first fair I can remember going to was the Springfield fair which was, you know, the original country fair, it still is, and Muskie would speak at each of these fairs. And we went to them all. We went to the Skowhegan fair and the, you know, all, every little fair because my children nowadays will say to me, "Oh, I've never heard of that fair before." And I'm like, "I've been there, believe me." And then we'd dance at the, my brother and I would dance at the fairs, and the Blue Hill Fair, when it rained, was horrible because it was just complete muck, it was not tarred. Now the Blue Hill Fair is tarred, so it doesn't, it doesn't mean quite the same thing.

And then my mother instituted going to the Bangor Fair and she got some donations and was able to get a booth under the grandstand at the fair. And she had her little sound system and every once in a while she'd stand me up on the table and I'd sing a Democratic song or some other kind of song. And we were there for the whole fair week and, you know, from crack of dawn until ten o'clock at night or eleven o'clock at night when it closed. And, you know, it was just a lot of fun.

DN: Do you remember some of the reactions of the people who came to the booth?

MEJ: Oh, yeah. And my mother caught on to the fact that, well, that wasn't just going to bring, you know, I couldn't sing twenty-four hours a day or dance or whatever. That was good for a time being, but she needed something to draw the people in other than just having the candidates there and shaking your hand. So my mother decided she would sell salt and pepper shakers, and she had little teeny salt and pepper shakers. And if you know anything about people in the country, people in the country collect salt and pepper shakers and little trinkets, and she had all kinds of little trinkets and salt and peppers and she sold those for years and years and years at the fair. And it made money for the Democratic Party. That was pretty interesting, I thought.

DN: Now, this happened every campaign. Did she go out in the off years, too?

MEJ: She campaigned year round, good Lord, but I would assume that they always had a Democratic group at the fair after that. I don't think it was, because back then it would have been every four years, no, every two years, wasn't it?

DN: Every two years.

MEJ: And so I think they had it every single year. I can't remember. And, of course, Wednesday was always Governor's Day. And then one of the times was, I believe it was when Horace Hildreth ran in 1958 was when the, the Republicans then had a Republican booth.

DN: That was the year that Senator Muskie ran, or Governor Muskie ran against Senator Fred Payne for the U.S. Senate seat.

MEJ: Right, and I think this was the time, but I could be wrong. And the Republicans had this

booth, but they had a voting booth, an automatic, electric voting booth, and so that was the big draw so everyone would go to it. So my mother campaigned twice as hard, and of course she had every Democrat she knew in there that was politically-minded helping her to do this, and my mother was actually counting votes of people that were going into this voting machine. And they'd come out and say, "Yes, oh yes, we voted for Ed Muskie." And so then every night when the *Bangor Daily News* would come to collect the tally, it would turn out that the Republican, whoever it was, had won by a sizeable margin. And my mother was just shocked about it. And come to find out, she stood there and found out, one night she saw them when they added more numbers to it. So she made a big, big stink about it, so they had to stop the voting.

DN: Now, while she was battling the *Bangor Daily News*, was your father still working for them?

MEJ: Oh no, no, my father only worked for the *Bangor Daily News* for a very short time. And he went to work for Northeast Airlines in, I'm going to say like 1940, and he worked there up until he died in 1971. He was manager of Northeast Airlines in Bangor. And Northeast Airlines was later that year, in 1971; it was bought out by Delta Airlines.

DN: And how did your father take to politics? I take it he hadn't grown up in an active Democratic family.

MEJ: Well, they were Democrats, but not in the type that my mother was. And my father was very good natured, and he was, he got involved and he would lend his name to, I can remember of many times, for county commissioner. But, of course, the Republican always won. And the one time that he didn't put his name in for county commissioner, I believe was the 1960 campaign and that was the Kennedy landslide, and Ed Stern put his name in for it and he got to be county commissioner. My father was so mad. But he was a real good sport, and he, he then got involved in citywide politics and became, ran for the city council and was on the city council for ten years and became mayor of Brewer.

DN: Now, over the years, as your mother was campaigning, you obviously were getting a little older and you were also meeting the candidates over and over again. Did you have a chance to see Senator Muskie, or Governor Muskie and then Senator Muskie in action much?

MEJ: Well, I guess you could say behind the scenes would be more like it, because we were quite often down at the Blaine House. And I became friendly with Steve and Ellen Muskie, and we would go upstairs and I played many, many games of pool upstairs in the Blaine House. I can remember one time there was a, I believe it was a March of Dimes silver tea, and we got in a lot of trouble because we slid down the bannister and slid into the silver bowl and knocked it off. So, I've had some interesting times with that.

I can remember, this was pretty interesting, that back when, this was around the same time period, I'm going to say 1954, they didn't have a candidate for Congress, a Democratic candidate for Congress for the 2nd District And my mother, you know They were going to have to just accept that the Republican was going to be the candidate and would win by default. So somewhere along the way they found a candidate, and I believe his name was Paul Fullam, and

he was a professor from Bowdoin College, wasn't he?

DN: No, Paul was a professor at Colby, and in '54 they got him to run against Senator [Margaret Chase] Smith.

MEJ: Okay, so that's what I thought. Okay, so now, listen to this story, this is very interesting. My mother took me out of school and I can remember we took a taxi, because my mother didn't drive, and we went, she picked me up and she had her coat on and it was, I'm thinking it must have been spring, because it probably was before the primary maybe, or, well anyway, whenever it was. We went down on Wilson Street and we stopped at the dry cleaners and I thought, "What in the world are we stopping here for?", because my mother told me we were going to meet Eleanor Roosevelt. And Eleanor Roosevelt was coming through to go to Campobello and she was going to make a speech at, she was staying at the, in the presidential suite at the Bangor House, the hotel, and she was going to make a speech and she was going to endorse Margaret Chase Smith because she was a woman. And so this was kind of a big deal.

Well, they [the Democrats] found a candidate the night before, so my mother got a phone call, because there were no faxes back then and there were no, you know, any type of communicative devices that would have had it on the spot that they had a candidate. So she got a phone call and she was told to go tell Eleanor Roosevelt to please not endorse Margaret Chase Smith, to endorse the Democratic candidate. So my mother said, "Okay."

So there we were, we were down at the dry cleaners and I didn't know what we were doing there. My mother came out and wasn't she mad, because her dress, and back in those days you had one or two good dresses and that was her good dress, she had it at the dry cleaners and it wasn't ready. And she did not have time to go back to the house to get another dress. So we headed over to Bangor and I didn't know what this problem was until she whispered to me and told me that she didn't have anything on under the coat except her slip. And so she had to go meet Eleanor Roosevelt.

We went in and we went up to the presidential suite and I remember my mother told me to stay and sit in the little chair outside the door and wait while she went in and delivered her message to Eleanor Roosevelt. Well, as it turned out Eleanor Roosevelt was very gracious and kind and invited my mother in for tea, and invited her to take her coat off. And my mother was, you know, very gracious and said, "Well thank you, but my little girl is outside the door and we need to go back," and whatever, and I'm just here to tell you. And she said, of course, she would endorse the Democratic candidate. Well, she invited me in, too, and we had tea with Eleanor Roosevelt. And finally my mother told Eleanor Roosevelt why she couldn't take her coat off, and she thought it was quite funny.

DN: Well that was early April, it would have been early April fifty years ago.

MEJ: Okay, so then, quite often when, while the candidates were campaigning up through Penobscot County they would spend the night at Uncle Garf's house in Millinocket. And Uncle Garf lived by himself, his wife had died, and he would get a whole great big meal together, and usually there were lobsters or there was a turkey or whatever. My mother would go ahead and

cook everything and, you know, put out a big spread for everyone. And I can remember that Paul Fullam came up and he was staying there that one night, and I think he had, he died before the election, if you recall, he had a heart attack and died.

DN: And this was, he died in 19-, early 1956 before he planned to run for Congress.

MEJ: Right, so this particular time, because I can remember he was, he got ill up to my uncle's, that stands out in my mind. But you know, my Uncle Garf always opened up his house and people stayed there willingly and free and, you know, wined them and dined them and did everything, and always was a great help to the party.

DN: Tell us about your, can you describe your Uncle Garf and what he was like as an individual?

MEJ: Well, he would do anything. If you would tell him, and he was such a good man. He would always, like for the . . . He was a great basketball fan. And when, Stearns basketball was the ultimate, absolutely the ultimate, and they were the best team around, always. And Uncle Garf would, when they came to the tournament, and it was, part of the time the tournament was at the University of Maine but then when they got the Bangor, when they played in Bangor Auditorium, he would take Room 120 at the Penobscot Hotel in Bangor, down on Exchange Street. And he would just open it up and people could come and stay there, it was a hospitality suite. And always he would maintain that, you know, there was always food there, there was always drinks there and he would, you know, have liquor and everything for people. But Uncle Garf never drank. So he was just, you know, he was just a very open man.

And if somebody said, "We need a hundred dollars for this," he would somehow get it for them, for whatever. Or if somebody said, "We need to go put signs up here," he would go and take off and put those signs up, or find somebody to help him do it. He was just, you know, a really enterprising person. He started a lot of things up in that area. He started the different, there was a couple of bridges up there, and he started the, or built the new post office, he got a new post office up there. And there was like the information booth, you know, for people to come to see Mt. Katahdin, he started that. I mean, he did a lot of things for his community.

DN: Now, in 1956 the Democratic state convention was held in Brewer and we had some famous people, one of whom I believe came to your house.

MEJ: Yes, that was quite an event. We had just built the house that we're in right now and it was not completely finished. However, my parents had moved in like the weekend before. And I can remember that they were, because of, it was a big event because there were photographers here from like *Time*, or *Life* or something. And I don't know if they were here because of the fact that Ed Muskie was running or the fact that they were doing a story on Maine, or if it was because Bette Davis was here. But Bette Davis came here, and Gary Merrill, and I can remember she, my mother was all excited when she walked in and saw Bette Davis sitting on her couch. And Bette Davis had donkey ears, she had a hat that had donkey ears on it, and I can remember she let me wear it. And I took it to bed with me but she came and got it away from me before the night was over. She came right in and got it and took, she said, "This is mine." And

I'm like, I was hanging on for dear life. But anyhow, they opened the house up and they had a, actually it was a housewarming and all kinds of, you know, a big party and they had a great time.

DN: Other than taking the hat away from you, do you remember much about Bette Davis that time?

MEJ: Yes, she had just been in "Mary, Queen of Scots" or she was getting ready to be in it, I think. She had her hair all chopped off. And I can remember, she was such a famous actress that it was quite a thing to think that she was staying here.

DN: We have mentioned Bob Baldacci, who was Governor John Baldacci's father . . . (*slight pause in taping*) You mentioned John Baldacci's father, Bob, and I wonder if you could recall your mother and him working together and what it was like in those days, working in local politics.

MEJ: Oh, my mother had the Baldaccis on the phone all the time. And, you know, I think Bob, especially, was so devoted to the political machine in Bangor that quite often I think his wife, Mary, got kind of mad at him. Because, you know, he was a, my mother would say, "Well, we got to do this, we got to do this," and he would organize, he and his men would organize everything in Bangor. So he was a really, really wonderful man and always good hearted and gave good advice, from anything that I can ever remember about him.

When we went to the Democratic National Convention in 1960 in California, in Los Angeles, Mary Baldacci hadn't seen her sister since they were very, very young, her twin sister. They were separated. The mother passed away, I think, and they were separated. And one stayed with one aunt and another one went with somebody else. So they were terribly excited about going out there. And I remember that when we got to the convention, my mother had to go a week early because the convention, she was on the platform committee, and we stayed, through friends here, we stayed at, for like a weekend, we stayed in these people's house because our hotel was being renovated and it wasn't open yet. And we stayed at this, they were friends of the Milans, Charles Milan, and this was old, old grandfather Milan.

DN: That's M-I-L-A-N?

MEJ: Yes, and they were lovely, lovely people. And they had made a lot of their money through bootlegging, but anyway they knew these people and they opened their house to us, and they picked us up. They owned, they had rental cars and so they gave us a rental car to use the whole time we were there. And they had this fabulous, fabulous house and we stayed there. My brother slept on the (*sounds like: len-eye*) in their house and my mother and I stayed in the guest house for that weekend, and they had a beautiful swimming pool. But the one thing I noticed was that they had bars on the windows, and I couldn't imagine what that was all about, being from Maine.

Anyway, so we then had our rental car and we went to our hotel that weekend, that Sunday. And my mother was walking along the hotel as, you know, with the bellhop, and she's going along and she said, "This is so exciting, we're from Maine," and on. And he's like, "Oh, I'm from

Maine.” And she said, “Really,” she said, “where in Maine?” And he says, “Oh, you'd never know,” he says, “a little teeny, teeny town.” He says, “Nobody's ever heard of it out here, that's for sure.” And she says, “Well, I'm in politics in Maine,” you know, “where was it?” And he said, “I'm, oh, it's a place called Millinocket, Maine.” And my mother said, “What street were you born on?” And he said, “Penobscot Avenue, why?” And she said, “So was I.” And he was much younger, of course, and he couldn't believe it after that. And she, of course, got in touch with his parents when she came back.

But anyway, we had that car from those people what we stayed at their house and we used that the whole time we were there, we were there for like ten days. But my mother, being a Democratic National Committeewoman, she had another car that she used, she could use, and certainly we didn't need two cars. And so she, Ed Muskie, by this time he was Senator, he didn't get a car. So she gave him her car, so he was lucky he had a car because of my mother. However, Ed Muskie at the time

At the hotel, you know, you got to think about this, we're all from Maine, you know, none of us have all been, and of course I was only twelve years old so I'm looking at it from my perspective at the time, but when I think back on it now, you know, this was quite a thing for us all to be there. And the Baldaccis were there, and my mother was there, my brother went, and I went, but my father had just had pneumonia and his doctor wouldn't let him travel, so he stayed home.

And so anyway, I can remember that Ed Muskie, you know, when there was free time everybody stayed around the pool, it had this gorgeous pool with a high diving board and the whole works, and Ed Muskie burned his feet so bad he had to wear sandals for part of the convention. But they all had a great time. And I believe, I think that I have pictures of my mother, and I'm not sure if Ed Muskie was there, I'm ninety-nine percent positive that he was there when they all went to Cyro's one night and had a really fun time at Cyro's, which was *the* nightclub of the time.

I do know that at that convention my mother was going, there was a gala and Judy Garland and Sammy Davis, Jr., and Dean Martin, and Joey Bishop I think were all there, and it was like at the Beverly Hills Hotel or the Beverly Hilton. It was *the* fancy hotel at the time. So my brother and I dropped my mother off and we went inside, no, I take that back, we stayed outside. And she was kind of upset because she, something had happened and she didn't have her ticket, someone had taken off with her ticket and she was, you know, by herself. She didn't go with the group because my brother and I dropped her off, and we were going to go sightseeing around looking for movie stars. And so she was kind of nervous, you know, all by herself, she'd never been to anything like this before. And as she walked in they had a band playing outside, and as she walked in, we went to drop her off and we said, “Well, we'll wait until you get inside the door.” And they started playing the Maine Stein Song and she just waved and she went inside.

And then later on when we came back, it was probably like ten or eleven o'clock at night, we came back. And, my mother didn't get to sit with the Maine delegation because somebody had her ticket, so she ended up sitting with, I think it was the North Carolina delegation, and it was just my mother and all these senators and delegates from North Carolina. And she said what Southern gentlemen they were, every time she stood up they stood up, because she's trying to see who had her ticket down at the Maine table. And they were really, really nice and she made a

good friendship with them, because they used to call, when Kennedy won they called her, you know, all of them called her. However, and that night my brother and I, when we came back, they snuck us in and we got to see all those people perform and so it was really quite an event. Um, let's see, I'm trying to think

DN: In that campaign, do you remember, did you go to Lewiston or to Portland when Senator [John F.] Kennedy was campaigning for president that year?

MEJ: Oh yes, oh yes indeed. Well first he came to Bangor, and Mama organized that whole thing and I remember it was quite a big deal, because I remember she had the Penobscot Indians on the stage and they performed beforehand. And that was a big deal; that was probably the first time that they had ever done anything like that and it was, you know, it was really nice. Well, Mum got to ride with, in the caravan, she flew on Kennedy's plane, I think they went to, as far as, they went to Presque Isle and they went to Portland and all, she flew on that whole circuit. But that was in July.

And then in November they had the whole, the rally in Lewiston and, of course, I can remember that, it was like the, a couple of nights before the election. And it was so cold, because we waited for hours and hours and hours and hours and, you know, they kept having these speeches and they kept having singing and they kept having everything, and it was just freezing. So finally he came and it was terrific and it was just, you know, like people went crazy because everybody was for President Kennedy. And, you know, nobody had ever thought of such a thing in the state of Maine, that there could possibly ever be a Democratic president, and especially a president who was Catholic.

DN: You were twelve years old in 1960, and you were about to enter your teenage years; did you maintain your interest in politics through those years?

MEJ: Oh yes, oh absolutely. And after President Kennedy was elected my mother was appointed acting postmaster in Brewer. And she wanted to be the postmaster very, very bad, but as it turned out a veteran got it in the end, but Senator Muskie did everything he could to help her out to get that position but it just didn't work out in her favor. And Margaret Chase Smith also helped her.

DN: Did she, what did she do in politics after that, after the time as acting postmaster?

MEJ: She lost the post office in 1965 or '66 I think it was, and after that she went back into politics but she didn't run for anything else, she was, you know, she just was an active Democrat. She organized Brewer and ran Brewer, and back into the early seventies, when I married, I married in 1969 and she got my husband involved, and my husband became the Democratic city chairman in Brewer and then he, we worked a lot on politics in the local area as far as that was concerned, and my husband was on the school committee and the city council.

Then in 1980, oh, I need to go back and tell you something, it was really funny, because this coincides with what I'm going to tell you in 1980. In 1960 when President Kennedy was running, like I say, our house had been built in '54 and we had moved in in '55 there. And

anyway, my parents had a, the lawn was just a front lawn and my parents decided they were going to put trees out front because this was the, we were the second house on this street and it was very windy and in the winter the driveway would just fill with snow. So my father decided to put trees out front of the house. And so he, they went into the, out into the woods behind us several miles and they found some nice trees and they dug them up and they came back, they were going to bring them back to plant.

And on the way back they found a farm house on fire, and there was no fire station in this area, where they were. And so I can remember they told me to stay in the car because they were with some other friends, who were also gathering trees, and I took care of the little girl in the car and they went and they put out the fire. And finally the fire department came, but they had been there like an hour before the fire department came, so they had a bucket brigade. And back in those days my mother went to the hairdresser once a week, and so she had had her hair done. And she, using the bucket brigade they would hoist up the bucket and, you know, when they poured the water on the fire it would come back down and get you all covered with water. So my mother looked pretty bad by the time she came back from the fire.

And my mother being quite, having a lot of ingenuity here, she came back and they were planting the trees and all, and my mother had a long phone cord, because back then you didn't have more than one phone in your house. But she talked the telephone company, the person who was the repair man, one time when he was here, she talked him into giving her an extra long cord, so she could carry this cord around all over this house. And so the phone rang and I hollered to my mother, and she was out front on the front lawn. And I said that she had a phone and so I took the phone out as far as it would go on the front lawn. And my mother talked, and sure enough someone had called her and said that Ted Kennedy, who was very young then, was coming to help organize a, the campaign in Maine for his brother, and that they were going to have a meeting at the Oronoka. So my mother said, "Okay, yup, when is it going to be?" "Tonight." And my mother's like, "I can't go." And they said, "Oh yes, you have to come, you have to come."

So she gathered herself together but, of course, she didn't have any way to do her hair, so she had a lovely hat that she put on and she went off to the Oronoka, which was a nice restaurant at the time. And so my mother got there and they wanted, she met Ted Kennedy and she thought he was great and everything, and they wanted her to have her picture taken with him. Now, this was after seven o'clock at night and back in those days you didn't wear a hat after seven o'clock. And so they said, "You need to take your hat off in the picture." And she said, "I can't." And Ted Kennedy is like, "Oh, come on, take off your hat Madelin, you'll be fine." And she said, "No, you don't understand." And so she explained about the fire and she said, "I can't take the hat off, my hair looks terrible." And so he said, "Well, come on, take your hat off." So she takes it off and he's like, "Put your hat back on." So in the picture my mother has her hat on.

So, twenty years later when Ted Kennedy came back to run himself for president in 1980, first he came to Peak's Auditorium in Bangor and, you know, had his whole entourage with him, and my mother introduced him to everybody in Bangor that night. But when she first met up with him, and she hadn't seen him for years, he said to her, "Madelin, where's your hat?" And she's like, "How on earth would he ever, ever, ever remember such a thing?" But when you think

about it, those are the kind of things that stick out in your mind, even though you've seen all kinds of things in the world, but when you come to a place those are the things stick out. And then later on he came back to Brewer and she knew everybody, so she introduced him to everyone in Brewer that came. So then, of course, she was mixed up with helping George Mitchell get elected. And my mother passed away in 1985.

DN: She had a long and productive life.

MEJ: She sure did.

DN: What were the qualities that you think made her so successful in politics?

MEJ: I think the fact that she was spontaneous and that she had a good imagination, because without an imagination I don't think you can get very far with anything. She was a creative person, and she knew how to organize, and she also had the [honesty and integrity to represent the Democratic Party in our area].

End of Side A
Side B

DN: This is the second side of the March 22nd, 2004 interview with Mary Ellen Kiah Johnson. Mary Ellen, you talked earlier about your mother growing up in Millinocket and your uncle, Great Uncle Garfield Jones and campaigning in Millinocket. What can you tell us about the town of Millinocket in those days and what it was like campaigning there?

MEJ: Back in the early fifties, Millinocket was a vibrant town. It was, you know, everybody had a job, everybody had a nice house, it was after WWII, it was a great place for people to go and live and work. And everybody owned their house, everybody had a camp on one of the lakes up there, it was a great place. It was like right out of "Pollyanna". They would have, always when they had the speeches they would hold a [Democratic rally]; if it was in the summer they held them at the bandstand, and they had the typical old fashioned bandstand with the popcorn machine and the peanuts, they sold hot peanuts, and it was just, the whole atmosphere, it was a fun time to grow up in.

DN: Did your mother carry some of the habits of Millinocket to Brewer?

MEJ: Oh absolutely, yes indeed. I can remember one time when Muskie was running for governor, and they used to hold the soapbox derby in Brewer. And my mother campaigned just up and down the crowds, because it was a huge event and there was like a big picnic on the athletic field, everything. And I can remember she had, oh, my mother and I had donkey dresses, matching donkey dresses, and she wore her dress. And she had, you know, I can remember they had, oh, the straw hats with, you know, bumper stickers around them with, you know, "Muskie for governor" on it. And my mother campaigned so much, along with a lot of other people, but after that day she had the most horrible, horrible sunburn. But, you know, she did it for the party and she was, you know, she was a good person to do that sort of thing. She knew everybody.

DN: When she was finished in a sense with regular politics, did she keep in touch with Senator Muskie?

MEJ: Yes, she always kept in touch with the office, not so much with Senator Muskie, but, because he was by then a statesman and, you know, he was just well beyond Maine. But she kept in touch with his office and would always notify, so that he could keep in touch with Maine, people in this area, for a birth, a death, a congratulatory note, so that people would always have that keepsake.

DN: Now, Bangor wasn't always the easiest place to, Bangor and Brewer weren't always the easiest places to campaign or to work and there were some divisions. Did your mother talk much about the problems of politics in Bangor?

MEJ: Oh, yes. Yes, there was a lot of division in Bangor, and especially between the two brothers, Bob Baldacci and Vasco Baldacci after a while. And Bob kind of got out of it, got out of the political end of things for a while and Vasco took over. And he was, it seemed to me anyway, to be the major promoter of certain causes. There was Danny Golden, who was also involved, he was a labor man, he worked for the phone company, and also Bob Murray came in to become involved and he -

DN: Are you talking about young Bob?

MEJ: Oh no, his father.

DN: His father.

MEJ: Yeah, in fact they were the ones that had President Carter stay at their house then, back when he came to visit. So you had kind of the two factions that you had, after a while it was the Murrays, and the Baldaccis went in with the Murrays, as opposed to, when Vasco left, Vasco and Bob split up and Vasco moved away, and then Bob came back into it again, so that was when they kind of formed a union.

DN: And do you remember Ben Dorsky, speaking of labor unions.

MEJ: Yes, oh yes. Yes, I've been to the labor hall many a time, especially collecting money for trying, you know, promote some event and they were, I'd always go in and get the check.

DN: And do you remember your mother talking at all about dealing with Ben and with the trade unions, the Maine AFL-CIO?

MEJ: Yes, I do, and I can remember that a lot of times that they needed to do particular things to help the union and, if they wanted the union to help the particular candidate.

DN: Did you get involved yourself in politics, independent of your mother?

MEJ: Oh, I was involved all through, the Young Democrats at the University of Maine when I was at the University of Maine. And then after I graduated from Maine and got married, when my husband got involved in, my mother got him well involved in the Democratic politics. We had quite a thing here when, we had the Carter-Mondale caucus and we had, we must have had five hundred people at it. And we were for, I believe it was when Kennedy was running, I think that's when it was, and Mrs. Mondale actually came to the labor union, the labor hall that morning and said that, my husband was the city chairman at the time, and said to not vote for him for city chairman because he worked at Delta Airlines and it was not a union shop. So it was quite a time. And we won in the end. My mother called everybody there ever was in Brewer that came to that caucus, I'll tell you.

DN: Now, you were in college at the university in 1966, did you go then?

MEJ: Yes, 1966 to 1970.

DN: So you were there during the height of the controversy over the Vietnam War, and when Senator Muskie ran for vice president.

MEJ: Absolutely. And I can remember every day I would, the SDS, Students for a Democratic Society would lay on the steps of the Memorial Union showing the number of dead people, you know, representing dead people, dead soldiers and all, and you'd have to step over them in order to go to class.

I can remember my brother was in Vietnam in 1965 and 1966, and my mother was an ardent supporter of the Vietnam War as far as, you know, the fact that my brother was over there. My brother had a, he was a, he flew L-19s, he was a second lieutenant, and he, he saved a whole regiment, he won the Bronze Star and all. But while my brother was there, he hadn't, he wrote letters to my mother and said, you know, these people need help, and he worked with an orphanage. And my mother contacted all the churches in Bangor and Brewer and they sent like ninety boxes, gigantic boxes of pharmaceuticals and diapers and toys and blankets and all sorts of things over to him. And the Viet Cong put a price on my brother's head, and so he had a terrible time to get there, and after a while he couldn't even go, other people had to take the supplies to the orphanage. But he wrote all kinds of letters and they published them in the *Bangor Daily News*, but my mother organized the whole thing. So that was the way she was.

And she was an ardent supporter of the war, and I can remember after, well the war was still going on and they would hold parades in Bangor and Brewer. And my mother made a poster one day and said, "Welcome back, Viet Vets," and put it, and held it up and all, you know, the Viet Vets, there were just a few of them that even dared to march in the parade. And then somebody put a letter in the paper afterwards saying how much they appreciated the fact that this one woman stood there with a poster. You know, so that's the kind of person she was, she supported our voice for the Democratic Party.

DN: Did you find it difficult during that period at the university, with your brother in Vietnam, with your mother's support of the war, and all of the opposition on the campus?

MEJ: At that point in time, because we were so involved in the political end of it, we thought that our people were right. And we just felt, you know, these people were against, they were against us, why would they ever be against us, you know. These were quite often people that were free spirits and into more of the, you know, the drugs and you know, those were the, they didn't represent the typical American, or the typical Mainer as we would see them. But then, you know, we've all learned that times have changed and we didn't have quite the message that we should have probably at the time. But they thought they were doing the right thing while they were there.

DN: Did you have any encounters with Senator Muskie during that period?

MEJ: When he ran for vice president [in 1968]. He came to the university and, of course, I can remember that my mother was involved in that. And I can remember he spoke at the university and, because I remember, I was the student representative because I sat on the stage and all with it and, because I knew a lot of people and was involved in a lot of things at the university. So I can, you know, it was a great time. My mother was terribly upset when, my brother lived in New Hampshire afterwards, and my mother was very upset about what happened to Senator Muskie in New Hampshire [in 1972] and she, you know, she always thought he should have been president.

DN: Did you get a sense of what your mother's feelings were about Senator Muskie, other than being a supporter of his?

MEJ: Only that she always, she was very loyal and that she felt that he would make the right kind of decisions, because he came from Maine and he was honest. And she always said that she, like when she wanted to be a postmaster in Brewer, he could have pulled strings if he wanted to and he could have done some little sly thing on the side, but because he was an honest man he would do it by the book. And that's what she always said; he was a very, very honest man.

DN: Are there other recollections you have that we should get on the record here?

(Pause)

DN: Your mother became National Committeewoman; that wasn't an easy campaign, though.

MEJ: No, my mother ran, in 1956 we went to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, and she ran for a, for the Democratic National Committeewoman, she was a delegate. And I can remember, this was pretty exciting at this convention because in those days they had all kinds of marches around the auditorium, and if you got in one of those marches you hardly ever could get back to your, at your delegation.

Well, Uncle Garf was there, he wasn't a delegate but he was there. My brother Paul was Jack Kennedy's page, I can remember that. And, but my mother . . . Oh, Uncle Garf decided that we had to have something to recognize Maine, because they were right, always in the front of the podium. And so he, I don't know how he did it, he went out and he found a great big giant

lobster from Maine, I mean he must have paid a hundred dollars for it back then, and it was, you know, that would be like a thousand dollars now. And they put that, hung that lobster from the post where it said Maine.

And anyway, so my mother was in for quite a campaign fight at that convention because she was running, Lucia Cormier had been made the, I believe it was the Maritime commissioner, she was about to be made the Maritime commissioner.

DN: Collector of Customs.

MEJ: Collector of Customs, okay. And so she was giving up being National Committeewoman and so my mother ran against a woman called Thelma LaSalle. And I believe she was from Lewiston?

DN: No, she was from Winslow.

MEJ: Okay, but she was with the Louis Jalbert faction, Louis was from, he was what, a representative from?

DN: Lewiston, yes.

MEJ: From Lewiston. And I can remember that Louis was always on the other side. He was not for anything that my mother was ever for, or it seemed like anybody in the party was ever for. And I can remember my mother and he having a huge fight in a hallway near an elevator beforehand and, right before the vote, because I was with my mother. And my mother, the elevator door opened and the elevator wasn't there, and my mother almost pushed him down that elevator shaft, or it seemed like it anyway. And he was quite taken back, and I remember when she got to be National Committeewoman she never let him forget the fact that he didn't help her in any way. And he always was against her, always would try to run somebody against her. And she did not like that man. I never heard my mother talk a lot about someone she didn't like, but that was one person she didn't feel was a good representative for Maine, for the Democratic Party.

Also during that convention, when my mother won that fight, she got to be the youngest Democratic National Committeewoman in the country. So we were at a, something, where my mother met President Truman, and of course my mother was thrilled to death to meet President Truman. And he said that he had to meet her, because he'd heard so much about her because she was the youngest Democrat there, and so she was all excited about that. And he shook her hands, and she said he had such a grip, she had the ring on that I have on now, and he bent the ring. So she always told that story.

DN: Well, thank you very much, Mary Ellen.

MEJ: Well, thank you.

End of Interview