

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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George S. and Margaret M. Isaacson
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College. The date is March 15, 2010, and I'm at the home of George and Margaret Isaacson in Brunswick, Maine, and this Andrea L'Hommedieu. George, could you just start by giving me your full name?

George Isaacson: George Isaacson, George Steven Isaacson.

AL: And where and when were you born?

GI: I was born in New York, but my father was born in Maine, raised in Maine, and moved back to Maine very shortly after I was born.

AL: And so Maine's where you grew up?

GI: Right, I grew up in Auburn.

AL: Now, tell me your date of birth?

GI: October 20, 1948.

AL: And so what was Auburn like in the '50s and '60s when you were growing up?

GI: It was a great town to grow up in. We were a Jewish family growing up in Auburn, I always felt very comfortable being Jewish in that community. [We] used to go to bean suppers at the Sixth Street Congregational Church, as well as going to Hebrew school. They had a church league basketball, I played for the Beth Abraham-Beth Jacob basketball team, and we played against St. Louis and various churches in the community. But I grew up in Auburn, went to local schools, and then went off to Bowdoin after that.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

GI: My father's name was Irving, and he was in the lumber business with his brothers, they started that business after the Second World War up in Livermore Falls, he commuted to work every day. My mother's name was Helen, her birth name was Schonberg, and she grew up in New York and my father met her really just before the beginning of the Second World War, and

then he went into the service and they got married.

AL: And so Isaacson, the name Isaacson is fairly well known in the Auburn area, Auburn-Lewiston, and were you related to – you said your father's name was Irving, was he related to the other Irving?

GI: I practice law now with Irving Isaacson, the other Irving Isaacson. He and I are fourth cousins, once removed. I knew his children growing up, I didn't know Irving, or his father Peter, growing up, but all the Isaacsons in Maine are related. They came from a community in Belarus called Radoshkovichi, and they came over at different times, but to the best of my knowledge, all the Isaacsons in Maine know each other and are related.

AL: And Margaret, could you start by giving me your full name?

Margaret Isaacson: Sure, my name is Margaret McGaughey, M-C-G-A-U-G-H-E-Y, I am not from Maine, I married well. George and I were moot court partners at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, and I got to Maine through him.

AL: So where did you grow up?

MI: I grew up in Detroit, outside Detroit in one of the automobile industry suburbs, and then my family moved to New York, and then I went to college in California and then wound up at the University of Pennsylvania Law School where I met George.

AL: What was the suburb of Detroit like when you were growing up?

MI: When I was growing up, the suburbs were very much divided according to automobile company lines. The Ford people all lived in Grosse Pointe, and the American Motors people, which was my father, lived in Bloomfield Hills, my father worked for American Motors at the time George Romney was president for the American Motors, so that's the only political connection I have.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

MI: My father was William McGaughey, and my mother was Joan Durham McGaughey, and they were both from the Midwest.

AL: And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

MI: I had three older brothers.

AL: And did your mom work outside the home, or was she a homemaker?

MI: No, she didn't, she was busy raising all of us. It was certainly not a tradition or the

fashion for women to work outside of the home at that point, so no, she didn't.

AL: And I forgot to ask you your date of birth.

MI: May 29, 1948.

AL: So, and George, I forgot to ask if you had brothers and sisters as well.

GI: I have an older sister who lives in Boston now, is a social worker, has children, and I have two younger brothers and they both live in Boston.

AL: And so you met at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, you were moot court partners.

MI: We were.

AL: And at what point did you come to Maine?

GI: Well I came right back to Maine, I always knew that I wanted to come back to Maine, so I interviewed for jobs while I was a third year law student at Penn, and initially came back to a judicial clerkship here in the state, and then went to work for a law firm in Portland after that.

AL: And so was that around '72?

GI: Graduated law school in '73, and so I began my clerkship in September of '73, August or September of '73.

AL: And who did you clerk for?

GI: I clerked for Judge Thomas E. Delahanty, who was -

AL: Senior?

GI: Senior, he was a member of the State Supreme Court.

AL: And what was that experience like?

GI: It was a great experience, I was his first law clerk, I was actually hired by his predecessor, Donald Webber, whom I had known somewhat growing up in Auburn. Judge Webber was from Auburn, I had read Judge Webber decisions when I was in law school, and when I interviewed with Judge Webber, Judge Delahanty was then the senior judge on the Superior Court and was in the room. And Judge Webber explained that he was considering retiring, he didn't know who his successor would be but he thought it would be a good idea to have the senior judge from the Superior Court at least sit in on the interview. As it turned out

Judge Webber did retire and I went to work for Judge Delahanty. I was his first law clerk, so it was an exciting period for both of us to try to learn together.

AL: There must have been a lot of learning for both of you.

GI: Certainly on my part, he was a good teacher.

AL: And so what law firm were you with initially?

GI: Actually, George [Mitchell] was the person who interviewed me when I was applying for judicial clerkships; I didn't know if I'd get one. And I also applied to law firms and received an offer from Jensen Baird, and George was the principle interviewer in that process. And then when I got the clerkship I asked if I could defer my employment with his law firm for a year, which they very graciously agreed to. So I went to work for that law firm and actually for George, immediately after my clerkship.

AL: Do you have recollections of your impressions of George Mitchell during the interview process and the first times you've met him?

GI: Well, he was very much the reason that I decided to go to work for that firm. During the course of the interview, I asked what I would be doing at the firm. I wanted to do litigation, he was head of the litigation department at Jensen Baird, and he said I'd be working for him. And that was attractive to me from the start, so that had a lot to do with my decision to go work for that firm.

AL: And so can you give me a picture of what your impressions were of him? What was it that attracted you to that firm?

GI: I thought George was a very good blend of being authentic Maine and having a larger vision of the practice of law, of politics. He presented himself quite modestly but very energetically, and I knew he had an active litigation practice. He had no formal airs in the interview, indicated that his preference was a very informal, collaborative approach. I found the conversation easy, we obviously had a common framework in both of us having gone to Bowdoin. It struck me that it would be a good learning experience and a lot of fun.

AL: And at what point do you meet George Mitchell, during that time?

MI: I think I probably met him once at a Jensen Baird dinner or some sort, but my real introduction to him was when I applied for a job with him as an assistant United States attorney. I had been in Boston practicing law for four years after law school, and desperately wanted to come to Maine. I managed to land a clerkship with Frank Coffin, who was the chief judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit, and that was about the same time that George Mitchell was appointed U.S. attorney. He very quickly got authorization from the Department of Justice for a third assistant U.S. attorney position. Up until then there had been

only two assistants, it was Jim Brannigan in Bangor and Paula Silsby, who was the first female assistant United States attorney, was in Portland, and George got authorization for a third position. And when I heard about that – Judge Coffin’s chambers were upstairs in the federal court house, and George Mitchell’s office was downstairs – I knew it was the only job I wanted. I remember very clearly George Mitchell coming upstairs to talk to Judge Coffin about me, and thinking, ‘oh my gosh, my life hangs in the balance.’ But I was lucky enough to get it, and that’s how I began to work for him.

AL: And so you have a few impressions of Judge Coffin early on.

MI: Oh, many impressions of Judge Coffin, I stayed very close with Judge Coffin until he died earlier in the year.

AL: He’s such an amazing man. Can you talk a little bit about what made him so special?

MI: I think with Judge Coffin, it was an impish sense of humor combined with a very powerful intellect; he had a very strong sense of where he wanted to go. He was also a wonderful teacher to his law clerks. There are, I think, sixty-eight of us, and we’ve all remained very close over the years. He was in many ways a father figure to all of us and gave us sound advice and encouragement, and discipline when we needed it, but that was a unique experience for me, followed by another unique experience of going to the U.S. Attorney’s Office.

AL: And so talk about the U.S. Attorney’s Office. We haven’t interviewed Jim Brannigan, what was his role in the office?

MI: Well we were divided into two offices, Jim Brannigan headed the Bangor office, he *was* the Bangor office, he commuted from Augusta to Bangor every day, which is something I never understood, even though he was father of six children. And then in the Portland office, it was George Mitchell, Paula Silsby, and me. The result of that was that we all did everything; the office was too small to have much of a departmentalized component. Paula may have talked about this in her interview with you, but what happened when George became U.S. attorney was, Maine pretty much came on the map in terms of the criminal element. Up until then, federal crime in Maine had been fairly small scale, it was stealing Social Security checks, or odometer fixing, or bait fish. But about the time George Mitchell became U.S. attorney the big marijuana boats started coming into Maine, and those cases would tie up all four of us for months at a time, which meant that we were all working very, very closely with each other all the time.

GI: What was the bait fish case?

MI: It went to the Supreme Court, it did.

GI: Classic Maine.

AL: So what was George Mitchell’s management style in the office, especially when you

were working so closely?

MI: His management style was, he was the people person, he was the one who argued the motions, who examined the witnesses at trial, who negotiated the pleas. My recollection is that he was not especially fond of the purely academic side of practicing law, which is what I loved. So his management style was to let me do what I liked to do, and he would do what he liked to do, and the same was true with Paula and Jim. We all just wound up naturally falling into positions that we enjoyed, in terms of the substance of the practice.

AL: And what was he like to work for, in terms of, do you have a -?

MI: Oh, he was very charismatic. These big marijuana cases were quite glamorous, there would be boatloads that would arrive with, oh, fifteen, twenty tons of marijuana and twenty, twenty-five defendants, each of whom would have their high paid, out-of-state lawyers. And then there would be the three of us. So it was organized seat-of-the-pants, I mean we were all learning. Jim Brannigan was the only one who really knew how to do these kinds of cases, so the rest of us were learning with him. But it was fun, there was a lot of responsibility, Paula and I were both very young at the time, and we were giving enormous responsibility for lawyers who were pretty much fresh out of law school. George was just energetic, he was enthusiastic, he was encouraging, but he was at the helm of the ship. So it was a great combination.

AL: And how long did you work together with him in that position?

MI: He became a federal judge in 1979, about then?

GI: I think that's right.

AL: Yes, he wasn't for very long before he was appointed.

GI: He became U.S. attorney in 1977, I think, shortly after I left Jensen Baird, is that right, Andrea, '77?

AL: Yes, yes. And then '79 would be right, then '80 he was appointed U.S. senator. So how many years was that for you, what years?

MI: It was just about a year for me, maybe a little bit over a year. Not very long. I remember being sad to see him go, because it really had been a very exhilarating time to be in the U.S. Attorney's Office, and hoping that somebody who would be as enthusiastic and energetic as he was, would get the job.

AL: And was the judgeship a surprise? It was one that was created actually, right? It didn't exist before. He was the first one to hold that second judgeship.

GI: Right, and being assigned to Bangor. I think Judge Gignoux used to travel up to Bangor.

MI: He did, Judge Gignoux rode circuit.

GI: He would sit in Bangor, there was always a court house in Bangor, but Judge Gignoux, who was the chief judge, would hold court in the Bangor court house as well as the Portland [court house].

MI: And actually it sort of surprised me that being a judge appealed to George Mitchell, because he was such a social person, and being a judge is a rather reclusive profession, you get holed up in chambers with a couple of young law clerks who are neither very interesting nor good friends, and in some ways judges are cut off from the social network because the lawyers who would have been their friends really have to be very careful about their interactions because they might appear in front of them. So it kind of surprised me that he wanted to do it, but he did, and he got it.

AL: So then not too much longer after that, you hear he's been appointed to the U.S. Senate.

GI: I think George, when I was at the firm is when George ran for governor against Jim Erwin and Jim Longley, I think that was -

AL: Nineteen seventy-four.

GI: Nineteen seventy-four, that election, and George was favored to win that race and Jim Longley came out of the dark and won it, who was from Lewiston, so I knew of the Longley family. And so I don't think George was thrilled to be finding himself practicing law again after he had [lost]. He was, I think, National Committeeman for the Maine Democratic Party, so I think he had expected that there were politics in his future. So he came back to the firm, and I think he found the U.S. attorney's position to be a lot more exciting than commercial litigation, I think he found criminal prosecution to be a more interesting experience.

And I remember having a conference, a pre-trial conference with George Mitchell shortly after he was appointed a federal court judge in Bangor. And I had already left that firm and was with my current firm, and the attorney on the other side of the case was a lawyer from my old firm, a lawyer named John Amerling. So you had the situation where George is a newly appointed judge, he had previously been the boss of John Amerling and me back at Jensen Baird, and we were sitting in George's chambers and just all of us sort of wondering, 'how did this happen?'

And I think it was a very interesting decision on the part of Joe Brennan to appoint George, because George had beat Joe Brennan in the primary for the governor's race, and so it was really quite a gracious act on Joe Brennan's part to appoint George Mitchell. There was speculation at that time that Joe Brennan would appoint himself to the job. I think probably Ed Muskie had a major role in that, but I think George was thrilled to get back in politics, politics really was his sport and his hobby and his passion. The problem of being a judge is you are removed from politics from the day that you're appointed. So this was getting back in the game for George,

and I think he was very happy to be there.

AL: And so one can understand later when the rumors swirled about the Supreme Court, the U.S. Supreme Court, if you had heard about that. What did you make of that?

MI: I think he has always felt politics and the kinds of negotiations that he has done and is doing were much more interesting than hitting the books.

GI: I think George's interest in law was always the intersection of law and the real world. And I saw that in the practice that we had, we shared a secretary, I did his research, I would go to court with him, I mean that's who I worked for when he was with the firm. And abstraction in the law, although he is very capable of doing that, was not independently interesting to him; it was how the law affected real events in the world. I started teaching here at Bowdoin the year that I graduated from law school, the first year that I was working with Jensen Baird. After George went to the Senate he came back and was a guest lecturer in my class on some occasions, George would muse about the fact that he had once considered the idea of going into teaching himself, and had actually, when he was at Bowdoin, envisioned that that might be what his future held. And George and I had conversations in which he talked about the fact that what he really enjoyed was having an influence on real world events, and the academic side of the law doesn't afford that opportunity.

So I think when the issue of the Supreme Court came up, I'm sure that must have been very attractive, it's a very hard opportunity to pass up. But I think George probably thought on a day-to-day basis, sitting in your chambers with a pimply-faced law clerk, and dealing with the world through written decisions rather than real human interaction, he probably thought was not what his best talents and interests were.

AL: And we see his talents to the Northern Ireland Peace Accord later on, after the Senate.

GI: Which George has spoken about, when George came back here and spoke to classes that I taught. He actually, generally, when he came back, spoke in connection with my class, but would speak in a bigger theater or a larger venue, [and] he would describe what it was like dealing with the different factions in Northern Ireland. And you could picture George doing a combination of cajoling and a little bit of pushing, and being patient and all the human skills that I think go into getting things done is what he enjoyed most.

AL: And so how have you maintained a friendship with him over the years, where he's so busy and far away, does he keep that connection with Maine?

GI: When George was in the Senate he'd come back to Maine, and as I say, would speak at my class, and we'd have occasions to be talking on those visits. After he left the Senate, my contact with him has been much more limited, we'll occasionally see him at a function but it has not been as close as it was before.

AL: Talk to me about preparing for a case, if you can recollect a case in particular, what made him so good at what he did? Because I've heard he just had a very unique talent for litigation.

GI: He had a very good memory. George could sit in his office, and we'd talk about a client or opposing counsel or a witness, and George would say, "Well let's give him a call." And George would dial the number without looking it up. And you know, "How do you do that?" His memory was very good, and the way that it was very useful to him in litigation is that I could spend a week preparing for a case and put together a research memorandum and witness outlines, and George could pick it up the day before the trial and put it all into his memory and then go into court as if he had been living with this case for months. And I think that ability to not only remember but to bring to the fore the key points of the case was a real talent that he had.

MI: He was also very good with juries. It's probably similar to a politician's touch, but he would be able to communicate with the juries as if they were sitting in his living room and they were all just having a conversation about it, even though it was a one-way conversation. But he was a very good speaker, looked people in the eye, again, his memory served him very well in closing arguments, he would use very few notes, so it really was a conversation, it wasn't a speech.

AL: Yes, that's interesting. Are there other times or places in your careers and lives where you intersected with George Mitchell?

MI: Well he came to our wedding.

AL: Oh, he did? And that was in 19-?

MI: That was in 1981, it was here at Bowdoin College, and he was a senator by then, and I really did not expect him to come but he did, and it was delightful.

GI: There's actually one thing that you might find interesting, Andrea, when I started at Jensen Baird, the practice was to have attorney meetings, they were monthly meetings at the Cumberland Club in Portland. And before the first meeting that I was going to be attending, George said he'd like to chat with me for a moment, and said that the Cumberland Club had previously excluded Jews, and was that something that made me uncomfortable? Now this was after they had dropped that restriction, not that many years before but it had been dropped. My recollection, I may be wrong on this, is that the first person who joined the Cumberland Club who was Jewish was a former, I think, conductor or music director for the Portland Symphony Orchestra, but the practice had been that it restricted Jews, and as I say, that was past then, but George wanted to know whether that made me uncomfortable. And I said, "No," I said that was a former policy, that I respected the members having changed that policy, and I understand that they don't discriminate any longer.

I think we in fact did not continue to have the meetings at the Cumberland Club, just for

efficiency purposes, that it became easier to do it in the conference room at the law firm. But it struck me as quite remarkable, when you had a senior partner at this law firm who was talking to the most junior associate, and was sensitive enough to ask if that was a concern.

AL: Now, when you were at Bowdoin, were there any sort of leftover restrictions or biases?

GI: No, all the fraternities, to the best of my knowledge at least, at that time admitted Jews, so that I don't believe that there were any restrictions in regard to fraternity membership. I certainly never felt any discomfort at Bowdoin at all being Jewish; I had a great experience here. And that was during the Civil Rights era, during the Vietnam era, it certainly was not a time when I observed or experienced any prejudice. There was only one black student in my class at Bowdoin, and so I think in terms of admissions it was probably not so much that it was restricted as much as Bowdoin just wasn't reaching out to the African American community. But I never felt any discomfort.

AL: Now, you're still very close to Bowdoin for we'd say a great portion of your life. What attracted you to come to Bowdoin in the first place?

GI: And I have a daughter who graduated Bowdoin two years ago, and a son who's graduating this year. And as I mentioned, I've been teaching at Bowdoin since the year that I graduated from law school, which has been a tremendous opportunity. When I was a senior in high school the director of admissions was a man named Hubert Shaw, Hubie Shaw. And one day at Edward Little High School in Auburn, I get a call over the intercom system saying, "Will George Isaacson please report to the guidance office". I wasn't sure which latest infraction they were wanting to speak to me about, but I went down to Mrs. Jordan's office, she was the senior guidance counselor, and she introduced me to Hubert Shaw, the director of admissions at Bowdoin. And I was told by Mrs. Jordan that she and Mr. Shaw had decided that I was going to go to Bowdoin next year. And apparently that's how Hubie Shaw did it; he had these connections with guidance counselors in Maine high schools, and would go out and sort of select.

I think it would have been an insult to Mrs. Jordan if I hadn't, but it was something that I was very excited about. I mean my father – who was born in Norway, Maine, and grew up on a farm in Norway, and then the family made a move to Auburn (of very limited economic means) – described to me, when he was a boy having come to a track meet at Bowdoin once and watched the track events and thought that that was a world of rich Protestant kids that he would never have access to, and that he was very proud that he was able to send a son to Bowdoin. And Bowdoin was just a great experience for me, and I hold my office hours here in my home, my children were raised with Bowdoin students in the house all the time, it's been a great relationship that I have with the college.

AL: That's great. And so Margaret, are you still with the U.S. Attorney's Office?

MI: I am, I have been there going on thirty-two years.

AL: So that was the place for you.

MI: Well, it was the only job I wanted, and I was very lucky that I got it.

AL: Before we end today, I want to ask if there are things that I haven't asked about that you think are important to add that maybe I skipped over or I don't know about.

GI: No, I think your interview skills are very good, I think you've really drawn out our impressions of George Mitchell.

AL: Well thank you both very much.

End of Interview