

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Floyd L. Harding

(Interviewer: Mike Hastings)

GMOH# 040

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Mike Hastings: The following is an interview of the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project, an activity of Bowdoin College. Today is Saturday, September 27, 2008. I am Michael Hastings, the interviewer; the interviewee is Mr. Floyd Harding. This interview is taking place at Mr. Harding's residence at 14 Hillside Street in Presque Isle. The time is ten forty-five. Good morning, Mr. Harding.

Floyd Harding: Good morning to you, sir.

MH: Could I ask you, we have a little formal beginning, could I ask you to begin by stating your full name and spelling your surname?

FH: Okay. My full name is Floyd Leon Harding, and my surname, I guess you're talking about my last name, is Harding, H-A-R-D-I-N-G. Just the same as President Harding's name, except I'm embarrassed, he is a relative, he's a fourteenth cousin twice removed. But he was a Republican, you see, and so I don't disclose that to very many people.

MH: But I understand you have a brother who's named after him, is that right?

FH: Oh God, yes. My mother – this is history, because it was before I was born. But women got a right to vote, and President Harding was running at that time. And my mother was a Republican, and she was a chairman of the Republican Committee in town. And my father was a rabid Democrat.

MH: That's here in Presque Isle?

FH: No, no, it was in Albion, Maine.

MH: Albion, yes.

FH: Population of nine hundred people. And so my mother was delegated to greet President Harding, so she went down to greet him and she come back to my father and she says, "Oh Judson, he was so charming." She said, "You know, most politicians they talk at you and they're looking at somebody else, but he was talking to me and he looked right into my eyes when he spoke to me. Oh," she said, "you'd have loved that man, he is just so charming." And my father said, "Love him to beat hell," he says, "he's a goddamn crook, and they'll find out about him

sooner or later. He's a crook, that's what he is." My mother said, "Oh Judson, don't speak that way about President Harding, he is such a gentleman."

So she supported President Harding, and my father used to be away on trips, and he was away on a trip and he come back, she says, "Oh Judson, you'll be so pleased, now you have a baseball team, you now have nine boys. You just had a boy, his name is, he's ninth, so you have nine boys." And my father said, "You did? Well that's good, you did a good job Gracie; you gave me a boy, that's great. Did you name it?" "Yes," she said, "I did name him." "What did you name him?" "I named him Warren G. Harding." He said, "You ruined the goddamn kid's life. He'll never amount to anything. Oh, God, how could you have done such a terrible thing."

So anyway, the videotape will roll ahead, and I was, at that time I was majority leader of the [state] Senate, and someone brought a note and they said, "You've got to adjourn the Senate and listen, there's someone on Public Radio that's talking." And see, this is when I was, this is about forty years after, see, they interviewed President Harding. So I dutifully adjourned the Senate for a moment and went out, and it was my brother speaking on Public Radio. And he said, you know, "I was named Warren G. Harding after the most disgraced president in our history but," he said, "I'm grateful to Richard Nixon, because Richard Nixon has come along and he's made Warren G. Harding look like a saint."

MH: That's wonderful.

FH: "So," he said, "I'm grateful for Richard Nixon and I extend my thanks to him."

MH: And what did Warren, what did your brother do for a living?

FH: Nothing.

MH: Nothing?

FH: No, and he ended up being a millionaire.

MH: Really? Oh my gracious.

FH: Yeah. He bought land that had been taken on the, they put tax lien on it, he bought up a tax lien, this was all wooded land and nobody wanted it, it was just a dreg on the market. But then people needed pulp, wood, so wood came in big.

MH: Was that in Albion?

FH: Albion, (*unintelligible*), he bought up all those tax liens, because he bought them for almost nothing. But then they turned out to be worth money and so he turned out to be a millionaire.

MH: What did your other brothers –?

FH: As did I, I turned out to be a millionaire too.

MH: You came from a large family.

FH: Twelve in our family.

MH: Twelve in all. And are most of them still living?

FH: Oh, it's just two of us still living.

MH: Two of us. I see.

FH: Me and my older brother Mandel survived.

MH: Where does he live?

FH: He lives in Brooks, right down by where you live.

MH: Okay, I see.

FH: He operated a barbershop for years, and then he left there and he went to East Hartford, Connecticut where he worked in a plant. But what he loved best was his stay in Brooks, he stayed there for, did barbering for fifteen or twenty years.

MH: Well, it's almost exactly ten years since you were last interviewed like this for the Edmund Muskie Oral History Project for Bates College. I went and I read the transcript of that interview.

FH: Oh God, I dread it.

MH: Oh, you know, it's on the Internet now, anybody can read about it. Yeah, your whole biography is on the Internet, about your growing up, and it's very interesting. And they have now I think 440 interviews that are online, that people can read, yours being one of them. And as I was reading it, I'm not going to repeat questions that were asked then because the information is all there, but I did want to ask you about your prisoner-of-war experience.

FH: Right.

MH: You didn't go into that much then and I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about it now.

FH: Well, I didn't go into that much for good reason.

MH: Okay.

FH: When I came back from being a prisoner-of-war everybody knew about it, that I was a prisoner, and they said, “Well Floyd, why did you surrender? Why didn’t you fight on?” And it made me so pissed, you know? Of course, the reason I surrendered, I didn’t want my damn brains blown up, which is good enough for me. And these people that had dodged the draft, stayed away, then they felt – and then I was demeaned to have been a prisoner.

But John McCain, who’s now running for president, he made it, rather than being a little bit of a disgrace to be a prisoner, he made it as a hero. So you turn out to be a hero, see? So in this interim period, when John, it turned out I could be a hero, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., who I was, was my cellmate –

MH: Really?

FH: - in Slaughterhouse Five –

MH: Really?

FH: Yes, in Dresden, in Slaughterhouse Five, so he was on radio or TV, I saw him someplace, he says, “You people who were prisoners, you should tell of your experiences, it’s a valuable part of our history and,” he says, “it’s one of the things that the Americans did that was a disgrace, I mean it was an atrocity. They burned down that city and they killed two hundred and fifty thousand people, little children, women and so on, everybody that was there was consumed in the war.” I wasn’t consumed, I was lucky enough to have my guard, the German guard, who was a Dresdener, he was born in Dresden, and he knew the byways and underground and so on, and so he got us out of Dresden alive.

MH: How many cellmates did you have?

FH: There was a 150 in each cell, in each prison, and Slaughterhouse Five was, the Germans had these slaughterhouses, ten of them along in a row, but with the war there was no meat to slaughter.

MH: Right.

FH: So they used the slaughterhouse for a prison.

MH: What a horrible place to have to be. I mean, prison’s bad enough, but being in a slaughterhouse.

FH: Well, you didn’t think about it, because they were clean, whitewashed, and so they, oh no, they were -

MH: Mr. Vonnegut died just this last year.

FH: That's right, he did, yeah.

MH: Did you keep in touch with him?

FH: Yes, we used to write back and forth. I did have a letter here that I'd saved out, that I'd just gotten from him. But anyway, I'd have to dig through that whole pile.

MH: Wonderful author.

FH: Huh?

MH: Wonderful author.

FH: Yeah.

MH: Very successful.

FH: Yeah.

MH: You came back from the war and you ended up establishing a law practice here in town.

FH: Right.

MH: I had a cup of coffee across the street from it a few minutes ago. And you practiced law here, and you worked for the Potato Board?

FH: Well, there's a story to this. I mean, my dream when I was growing up as a child, I wanted to be a lawyer in a small town, where I could help people with their particular problems. And so I did get to be a lawyer and it took me eleven years after I got out of high school to get to be a lawyer. You got to go to four years of college, three years for law school and one year of being with somebody else. So, and then there's a year involved in searching to find what you're going to do and where you're going to be. So anyway, I, in searching for a job, you got to eat too.

MH: Right.

FH: And this, I was born in Albion, and I was in Albion when I saw this information for B.U., that they wanted to interview somebody to be in-house counsel to this potato organization. So I went up for the interview and geez, thirty-seven people had applied for the job.

MH: Thirty-seven?

FH: Thirty-seven people. So I dismissed it, I mean it was just, you go through it. But I told them the story about milking cows, and it's the basis of my whole success in life is my father telling me, "Boy, if you know where you're going to go, what you're going to be, you got to learn to milk a cow. If you don't know how to milk, you ain't gonna go anywhere, you ain't gonna amount to nothin' so learn to milk a cow." And he had some reason for that, because there's twenty cows, and if you can get four or five people to milking them, it's a lot easier for the four or five than it is for one. So he encouraged us kids to learn how to milk, and if you didn't learn how to milk it was goddamn tough on you – so I learned how to milk a cow.

And we used to have people come to visit from the city, and so he had this girl, I'll call her Catherine, and she came to visit. And my father said, "Floyd, show her how to milk a cow." Well when my father suggested something it was not open for negotiation. So I said, "Well first of all, Catherine, you got to learn, you got to get acquainted with the cow, she's got to like you." Like a damn cow, that'll be the day. "Well," I said, "just pet her and be nice to her so you can be friends, because if you're not friends with her, she won't give down her milk."

So she didn't seem to take to the idea well, so I said, "Well I'll leave you here and I'll come back." I came back in about twenty minutes and I said, "Elsie, how are you doing, have you got the milk started?" "Hell no, I ain't got any milk started. I can't get her goddamn tits hard yet."

MH: Oh, dear.

FH: So anyway, it's a little story I kept with me, and I told that story when I went up to Maine Potato Growers for their interview, about milking the cow. And afterwards I asked Cliff McIntire, who turned out to be a congressman later on, but he was the guy that hired me, I said, "Why'd you hire me? Because there's a lot more people, guys that applied for that job." He said, "Well that's true, there were but," he said, "you were the only one among them that knew how to milk a cow. And we wanted someone with farm hands-on experience, and we thought someone who knew how to milk had hands-on experience."

MH: Did you know anything about potatoes?

FH: No, nothing. Well, we knew because we grew, if you had a garden in Maine you had potatoes. So on the farm we were –

MH: A dooryard garden, yes. So you were with them for four years and then you went into the law practice.

FH: That's right. I longed for my dream to be a lawyer in a small town. I was doing very well with Maine Potato Growers, they paid me more than I ever dreamed I would make working. But I wanted to fulfill my dream, and so I gave them notice. And I had kids, I had three kids, and I left Maine Potato Growers. How I regretted it, though, Jesus.

MH: One thing I didn't get from the Muskie history interviews is, did you have some lawyer role models? I mean, is there somebody back in Albion that you, because there wasn't any mention of that and I thought, you wanted so much to become a lawyer, I wonder why?

FH: Well, there's this old lawyer from down to Belfast, and I used to go down to the courthouse in Belfast and watch cases, and this old lawyer tried cases. He was old, and he was telling me, he says, "Now young man, I'm not very smart, and you're young and you're smart and you're able. Would you help me with this case?" – this is on his cross-examination – "Because I don't understand some things about it, and you're smart, and would you help me with this?" (*Unintelligible*). By the time they got done with him, he had no case. So I thought he did it in such a genteel manner, he was so polite all the way through, and he just talked the guy out of his case. And this happened time and time again, and I admired the old fellow, because he looked like an old idiot, he was short like a box or dumb like a box, I should say.

MH: I actually grew up in Belfast. I'm originally from Morrill, not too far from Albion.

FH: Not too far from, yup. So anyway, that's the background, and he was a role model and I wanted to be like him.

MH: It was a big – it must have been a big decision, coming this far north after you'd lived in the, right outside of Augusta basically.

FH: Well, I guess so, but a job is a job.

MH: A job is a job.

FH: But you know something though, when I drove into Presque Isle, I liked the place. I can't describe it to you but, why I liked it, but I just liked the town. Just driving into it, I said, "God, a person would be lucky if he could practice law in a place like this." It's so friendly, the layout is so friendly.

MH: Were you the only lawyer in town?

FH: Oh, hell no. It was probably seven or eight.

MH: Seven or eight?

FH: Something like that.

MH: And did you end up specializing, or was yours a general practice?

FH: Well, it was a general practice. I, we talked about, in our law firm, about practicing family law, that's what we said, we were a family law firm. And anything that happened to a family was our business. Like the guy, the father's trying to work and he gets hurt, or he's

working on a job and he gets hurt, there's workers comp, or these different things that would happen to a family, or their kid gets in trouble, or the father gets caught for drunken driving, anything that would happen to a family, we would try to be helpful in that regard. And so that's what I wanted to do and that's what I started out to do.

MH: How many lawyers were you?

FH: In the firm?

MH: Yes.

FH: One.

MH: Just you.

FH: But then we picked up some other –

MH: I see.

FH: You know, a couple or so on as time went by. And I picked up my son.

MH: You have children who are lawyers then. Just one?

FH: Two.

MH: Two, okay.

FH: And I told the kids, I said, "Look, don't be a lawyer, because it's too much grief and there's too little reward. Be something else, don't be a lawyer." Kids don't pay any attention to what you say. They watch what you do, what you do sets a powerful example for them, because they think if daddy did it, it's got to be all right. They have such total faith in what you do, that whatever you do it has to be all right because you did it, but what you tell them for advice, they don't –

MH: In your Muskie interview you talked about the early years when you were, seemed to be, one of the lone Democrats in this area.

FH: Oh, God. What a lonesome life.

MH: Things have changed.

FH: Yeah, they have changed, they have changed and –

MH: Why do you think that happened?

FH: Well, people got their senses. No, we tried to convey the idea that the Democrats were the people's party, and the Republicans, in my campaign I said, "Can you think of anything that a Republican ever did for the working man? In all the history that you, you search it out and bring it to me, show me one thing that they've ever done for the working man and I'll take you out to dinner." Because they're not the working man's party, they're the rich man's party. They are there to serve the rich – at the expense of us people who work hard for a living. And that was my -

MH: Now which campaign would this have been?

FH: It was every campaign.

MH: Every campaign. Now you ran for the, were you first a state senator?

FH: No, I was, first I ran for the House of Representatives. I made every mistake in the book.

MH: Like what?

FH: Well, like I took, I thought you ought to take a stand on issues, like if you're for abortion, half the people are against abortion. You know, and so this is very bad, to take these stands on issues, don't do that. So I won on good stories, on being able to tell a good story.

MH: Like the dairy story.

FH: Huh?

MH: Like the dairy cow story.

FH: Right, that's right.

MH: So you ran for the House of Representatives.

FH: I ran for the... And I made every mistake, I took a position on everything that came along, and I lost by a landslide. So my son Alan, he was, I don't know, third or fourth grade, his teacher said, "Well Alan, the election is over. How'd your father do? He ran for the House." And Alan says, "He lost." "Well, that's too bad, I'm sorry he lost." Alan said, "Well at least he lost with a landslide." And I did.

MH: And how long was it before you ran again?

FH: Oh, in four years then I, I remembered all the mistakes I made and I tried not to make the mistakes again. I didn't take a stand on issues, I didn't do that. I'd tell them the story about,

you're driving along the way and you see an accident. You could drive on and not pay any attention to it, let somebody else look after it. But you know something? Nobody else may stop and help the people, so you better stop and help them, because you're at a risk, if you don't stop, nobody will stop, maybe. So, I tell them, you know, then would you let ... to some program that, we're stopping to help the people, and they're beside the road and they need the help. Whereas I'm pretty, why, rather than these New Deal liberal things, I didn't make it liberal at all. It was helping somebody in trouble, that's what we were talking about.

MH: Now when you were in the House and Senate, was the, who was the governor?

FH: I never was in the House.

MH: You were never in the House, so you were in the Senate then, and you were president of the Senate.

FH: It was Governor Reed, he was a Republican, and we got along famously.

MH: He's a neighbor – he was a neighbor, too.

FH: Yeah, he was right in Fort Fairfield, right, Governor Reed, and we got along good.

MH: Now was Clinton Clauson in when you first were elected? He was briefly governor before he died.

FH: He was, he died, no, he was not when I was, no, no, it was just Governor Reed, and we got along good. And this was part of my background, the mentally retarded.

MH: Hmm-hmm.

FH: See, John Kennedy was president and he had a sister who was mentally retarded, and he put in a program for the mentally retarded. And you know, I was a Democrat and I was in the state Senate at the time and so I got an appropriation for us to build a school for the mentally retarded. And I built it.

MH: Where was that?

FH: Where else? Presque Isle.

MH: Okay, right here. And how long did that school operate?

FH: It's still operating.

MH: It's still operating. I remember, I do recall that there was, I think it was under Governor Longley, there was an effort to de-institutionalize some mentally retarded schools, I know that a

number of them were closed or reduced. But you still have it here?

FH: Yes we do still have it, but they don't call them mentally retarded now.

MH: Right, disabilities, yeah, right.

FH: It's a handicap, handicapped children.

MH: What led, why did you have that interest?

FH: It's like the car beside the road. But the fellow that, I developed an interest because a guy came to give a lecture, and he was with mental health, and he told me this and he said, "In your state, you have imprisoned ten thousand people who – they committed no crime whatsoever, but they have a little mental problem, and so you lock them up and you throw away the key. And they have no right of appeal, and they never can get away. So don't drive by, they're beside the road and you could stop and help them. You can get an appropriation so that we can experimentally treat these people and we can find a drug that'll help them. So you could free ten thousand people from prison, which you have – they committed no crime whatsoever but they're in prison. There's no key to it. So I encourage you to stop by the road, you people that are going to the legislature."

So I got elected state senator and that's one of the first things I did, is get an appropriation to treat the people who were mentally retarded. It's just experimental; you try this drug, that drug. We freed most of them. And so I, I felt good about that, of course.

MH: Tell me, do you recall the circumstances when you first became aware of George Mitchell?

FH: Yeah, I was in the legislature, and, as you know, and George volunteered – of course Ed Muskie was worried about us. "What will happen when those inexperienced people take it over? God help the state of Maine." And so he sent people down, and George, to help us out because he worried about what's going to happen to the state because we had no prior experience and so on, you know.

MH: You were Senate president like your first year, right? Or something like that?

FH: I was Senate majority leader.

MH: Majority leader.

FH: It's much more powerful, it's the most powerful job in the legislature, the Senate majority leader, because you control appropriations. And I remember I used to make them pay the price if they wanted something. I remember this guy was a strong Republican, he was always giving speech pro-Republican, and he wanted a wharf for his town. And he sent his emissary and I said,

“Well, what he’s got to do, a couple of things,” I said, “he has to speak for the general Appropriation Bill, speak for it.” And he said, “Well, he’ll vote for it but he doesn’t want to -” “Well,” I said, “that’s not the way it goes. I want him to be able to speak for the Appropriation Bill.” So he did, he spoke for it, and spoke very well, and that he was wrong before and this time he’s right and he’d seen the light.

MH: So George Mitchell was sent by Ed Muskie to help you out.

FH: Well, yeah. I don’t put it that way, but, because George wouldn’t like that, really. He was just trying to be helpful, that’s what he was trying to do. And he was very helpful. George Mitchell had a gentle way about him that just, so he and I became friends, and when he ran for office he lost.

MH: In 1974.

FH: Yeah, he lost. And he said, “What’s the problem?” I said, “George, you’re too goddamn serious. I mean, each time you speak you’re out to save the world. Those people that are going to that luncheon, they’re not there to save the world. They’re there to have a good time, and you got to learn to tell a joke. And even if you only know one, it’s a lot better than telling no jokes at all.”

MH: Do you think he took your advice?

FH: He did, he told the same goddamn joke time after time after time.

MH: Now what joke was that? It was a cow joke.

FH: Yes, it was.

MH: We get back to dairy cows.

FH: It was a cow joke. I said, “George, this gives you a nice lead, because some of these people are farmers, and you can tell them a story about working on a farm and you, when you took the cow’s udders in your hands, and she’d turn around to you and she’d smile, and she’d say, “Thanks for the warm hand.”” That was – so, I mean it was always appropriate, “Thanks.” Is it corny? Yes. But this is the way you get your thanks for the warm hand. And so George would use that, and it went over good. “Thanks for the warm hand.”

MH: Now, in those early days did you, did Senator Mitchell ever, then lawyer Mitchell, did he ever get up here to Aroostook County?

FH: Oh, God, he sure did.

MH: In what capacity?

FH: Oh yeah. I don't remember, but he was here to do many things, because Ed Muskie would send him around.

MH: Right.

FH: Ed Muskie was, he was a tough guy to work for.

MH: Hmm-hmm.

FH: He was tough, tough, tough. And I used to tell George, I said, "Don't be like Ed Muskie. He's an arrogant ass," you know, one-on-one. George knew he was, and I knew he was, and he was a tough guy to work for. And, see, I'd set up the schedule for him and you have fifteen minutes to do this, that and the other, and he'd stop and talk to somebody for two hours. Threw everything off. And so then he would be upset because things aren't working right, and he said, "The faceless bastards that set up this schedule." "Well," I said, "they're not faceless. Maybe they're bastards, but I'm the guy that set the schedule, senator, and I mean I, I'm a very humble person." But he said, "You should be humble, because you have a hell of a lot to be humble about." So anyway, that's his experience with the senator.

So, no, the Senator, George Mitchell was here for a lot of different things, and I don't remember but we were acquainted with George. And he was very helpful to us when we started out in the Senate because you need people to do things.

MH: Right.

FH: You know, draft bills and draft motions and different things, and he was very skilled at that, and he was polite. And his contrast with Ed Muskie, Ed Muskie was so difficult to work with, so contemptuous. And Ed Muskie, we used to say he didn't suffer fools gladly, but George Mitchell was very sympathetic with us fools, and he suffered us fools gladly.

MH: Now he had an office here in Presque Isle.

FH: I believe he did.

MH: Absolutely. Yeah, yeah.

FH: When he got to be a senator, I believe he did, yeah.

MH: And you continued to have associations with the potato industry, even when you were in law practice, I take it.

FH: Yes, I did, I did.

MH: I mean this –

FH: And I saved the Maine Potato Growers; I mean they wanted to merge it.

MH: Merge with what?

FH: With, well they merged it with another potato, a co-op.

MH: Hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm.

FH: And I was representing a group of farmers that objected to the merger.

MH: I see.

FH: And the merger failed, because they had to get two-thirds vote and it's hard to get two-thirds vote –

MH: Hmm-hmm.

FH: - on anything, you know.

MH: Right.

FH: So we threw a roadblock in the path, and I represented the potato growers who wanted to keep... So, the outfit that wanted to merge with the Maine Potato Growers is now through bankruptcy, it's gone, but Maine Potato Growers is still around.

MH: Hmm-hmm. Tell me more about Presque Isle, what holds this community together?

FH: Oh, the people here are wonderful. You know, with my sadness, I've had my triumphs and I've had my sad times, they've been so generous to me in my times of sorrow and difficulty, they reach out. When you stumble and so many people are there to pick you up again. And so, I've had good health until last winter and I had congestive heart failure and double pneumonia and I damn-near died, I was in a nursing home for five months.

MH: You certainly seem to have recovered. You look great.

FH: I don't know, some people would, it affects your, what I had affects your brain, and the doctor up here, my doctor up here said that they had taken pictures of my brain but he said, Floyd, we couldn't find much up there to work with.

MH: What do you think that people up here remember most about George Mitchell as a senator?

FH: Well, George, I mean they always remember George as the guy that did the right thing, and at no matter what expense, you do the right thing. And George did the right thing. And he didn't wear his Democratic affiliation on his sleeve; he didn't even talk about being a Democrat. He talked about the people, trying to help the people with the problems they had. And this is what, he was here to help and that was his byword.

MH: Were you surprised when he became majority leader in the Senate?

FH: Oh no, oh no, no-no-no. George was, I was surprised, I would have been amazed if Ed Muskie had been elected majority leader, because he was much disliked in the United States Senate. You know, you can't really talk about this, but Ed Muskie had a very arrogant way about him. But George Mitchell had none of that at all; he just was trying to be helpful. Really. And he was, he *was* helpful and he helped me and he helped other people with a lot of problems, and we were grateful for his help.

MH: What did you think of his decision to leave the Senate?

FH: Well, I felt sorry about it, of course.

MH: Did it surprise you?

FH: Yeah, yeah, I was. And I felt bad because it's like losing a friend, you know. And he was such a capable advocate for us, for the state. And you don't get somebody like him, just once in a lifetime maybe, if you're lucky.

MH: He's done a lot since he left the Senate, though.

FH: Oh. Amazing person.

MH: Quite a record.

FH: Isn't he an amazing person? Like bringing the, those damned Irish and the British fought all those years, and now to get them together to, that's a miracle of a lifetime, if that's all you ever did in your whole life. You know, he brought those parties together.

MH: Tell me, Mr. Harding, were you involved in the efforts to prevent the closure of Loring, did you get involved in that at all?

FH: Well I was always involved in everything that went on.

MH: Yeah.

FH: Yeah, we tried to prevent the closure of Loring, just like we tried to prevent the closure of this base here.

MH: Right, the Presque Isle base.

FH: Presque Isle, this base.

MH: Which was started, the Presque Isle – that interests me – the Presque Isle air base –

FH: Right.

MH: That was started during World War II?

FH: Right.

MH: So, and -

FH: It was a Snark missile base.

MH: It was a missile base.

FH: They started with the missiles, and so it wasn't, it was a radio controlled missile, it wasn't a ballistic missile.

MH: You call it a Snark?

FH: Snark.

MH: S-N-A-R -

FH: A-R-K, it's a Snark missile base, yeah. And this, they tried to prevent it from being closed but – Ed Muskie was our point man at that time, and it was Jimmy Carter – not Jimmy Carter. Let's see, the -

MH: Truman, probably. Was it Truman?

FH: No, no, no, no-no. The name keeps wandering away. Kennedy –

MH: Hmm-hmm.

FH: Kennedy was president, and he closed, he came, we gave him this big welcome and people thought, there was, the press said there was about thirty-five hundred people there that gathered, but they didn't know how to count people at a political rally so I did my own count, and I counted fifteen thousand people. That made it a much bigger crowd than thirty-five hundred, fifteen thousand people. And so we had one of the biggest political rallies ever in Aroostook County. But then John Kennedy became president, and it seemed like just two days

after he became president he closed the base. And people here went down, Joe Freeman and Ken Colbath and I were -

MH: Now, Joe Freeman was who?

FH: Well, Joe Freeman was just a citizen-at-large, he was a French guy, he ran a Pepsi Cola plant, he owned it, and he was the Franco connection.

MH: I see, and Ken Colbath?

FH: Well, he was just -

MH: Another Democrat?

FH: Just another Democrat that was willing to work with problems. So anyway, we didn't dare to go out at night because people were so hostile towards us. They said, "Those damn fools brought that idiot from Washington here, and he could see that the base was useless, and he found out about it, we kept it a secret until he found out about it, then he found out about it because those two idiots, three idiots, brought him up here, and he closed the base so we lost all these people from unemployment." And so I, Ed Muskie was the senator, and I said, I called him and - he would talk to me - and I said, "We're in real trouble here. Joe Freeman and Ken Colbath and I, we were popular in town but we don't dare to be out at night, because of this base and all these people lost their jobs," and so on. So he spoke to John Kennedy, John Kennedy said, "Whatever they decide to do with that base, as long as it's for a public purpose, they can have it for a dollar." And so, and he says, "It's come to my attention..."

So the first thing we did was the runways, the airport, we transferred the runways to the city of Presque Isle. That was easy, right? So then the next thing is that they had these sheds, the missile sheds, but we had industrial development so we had those transferred to the Industrial Development Commission, all of those missile sheds, and there was a missile shed for each of the missiles, see. But there were three -

MH: So you have an industrial park there now.

FH: Yeah, right, we do have it now. But there was left over then, at the base they had the motor shop, body and fender shop, electrical shop, carpenter shop, and these different things, and it occurred to the group, there were ten of us, that we didn't have any vocational school here in Aroostook County and that we needed a vocational school very badly. And so we got together and we thought that what we ought to do with those buildings is transfer them into a vocational school so the kids could be trained with their hands. And it hit me because, you see, I was the one that had an academic background, from my family of twelve. But I had a brother that was a barber, I had a brother that was a mechanic, I had a brother that was a body-and-fender, I had a brother that was a carpenter, you know, and they were smart. But there was no facility to train them to do their job, see, I mean they just had to do what they could do to pick up, you know. So

we thought that it would be, the ten of us came up with the vocational school, and it's now called the Northern Maine Community College. We started that forty-five years ago, and I'm so proud. Eight thousand young people have gone through that school and had their lives and their skills improved. And I'm so proud to have been – I brag about it every chance I get. And I got a jacket that says on it –

MH: Oh really?

FH: Yeah, if I wasn't so crippled I'd go and show you the jacket. It says, "Northern Maine Community College, Floyd L. Harding, founder," right on the jacket. And it was very nice, but of course I gave a million dollars and for a million dollars you can get a new jacket. So anyway, I was so proud to be a part of that program. And we bought, we now have a vocational school – they don't call it that way, it's a community college now – and they invite me up there to, you know, I'm a founder, I can lend prestige.

MH: Well, you also have the University of Maine at Presque Isle.

FH: Yes, that's right.

MH: Now how long has that been here?

FH: From the time I was in the state Senate, it was changed. See, we had the community, we had teachers colleges throughout the state.

MH: Right.

FH: And we made the teachers colleges branches of the University of Maine, and so we had one here, it's called University of Maine at Presque Isle, it's called UMPI, so we got a branch of the University of Maine and I thought that was a good idea because I, geez, I had all a bunch of kids that had to go to school, and I couldn't afford to send them way down to Orono.

MH: How many children do you have?

FH: I had nine.

MH: Nine, okay.

FH: I couldn't afford to do that.

MH: Right.

FH: But if they had a school here, so they could go to school right here, you know.

MH: So some of them went to -

FH: Oh yeah, they all, all my kids took advantage of some phase of the university system.

MH: Did you ever teach any courses yourself there?

FH: No, no-no.

MH: I know sometimes lawyers will teach a course on the side.

FH: I know, I know, but I missed that one, I missed out, I would have enjoyed doing it. I used to go there and speak.

MH: Right.

FH: And, you know, 'You have a distinguished lecturer.'

MH: Sure.

FH: You know, and they'd call me a distinguished lecturer. And so, no, I used to go there to talk about things that were relevant to their, to what I had done and what – so no, I was pretty proud of that and I bragged about it ever since it got going. And we were so lucky to bring in the, from Bangor, Husson College is now a part of the community college. So, I mean the kids can get such good--- rarely a day goes by that I don't have someone tell me something good that the community college has done for them or their relatives or what have you. Oh, I'm so damn proud of that school. And they own *Star Herald*.

MH: Really?

FH: Every week they're on the front page or, prominent about something that they have done. And they have a public relations man, his name is Jason Parent, and he's public relations and he does a good job. And he's always escorting me around up there, the big deal, you know.

MH: What are your thoughts now about state politics? Do you feel that --?

FH: No one does it –

MH: - Aroostook County is playing its role in the state?

FH: We're a powerhouse in the legislature, because of the individuals.

MH: Which ones are you referring to?

FH: John Martin.

MH: Hmm-hmm.

FH: I mean I look at the community college, what he's done for them. And of course I had my part, too, at the University of Maine at Presque Isle. Ken Curtis was up here on a mission, and Cliff Wieden was the president of the college and he asked me if I could get, have some time to spend with Ken Curtis about this new dormitory that they wanted, that they needed so desperately. I said, "Yes, sure." So I sent up, but the governor had tons of things to do. This Cliff Wieden was a guy that prepared things right to the most minute detail, you know.

MH: It's O-D-I-N-E? Odine?

FH: Clifford O. T. Wieden, Clifford Otis Titus Wieden, that was his name. And so the governor was pressed and I said, "Look, Cliff has, he had done such a good job outlining this, just take his plan, proposal, governor, because you've got all these other things to do, you don't have time to go over all those papers and so on, just take his proposal and put it in as a part of your program that this is, your asking it to be done." And so he did, and we got the dormitory. And we did – he didn't spend any time with it at all. I said you got other things to do, more important things.

MH: Now, of course Governor Curtis or former Governor Curtis was one of the people who was considered when Senator Muskie became secretary of state. Governor Brennan chose George Mitchell. Did that surprise you, at the time?

FH: Yeah, it did, it did. I'd rather not get into it, but I was surprised. But it's worked out well, what was done; it's developed into the right thing to do. At the time, it didn't seem to be as hardly justified, but time has told us the wisdom of what was done.

MH: Right.

FH: So I accept it.

MH: Hmm-hmm.

FH: So what? I mean, you got to make the best of what there is, whether you like it or whether you don't like it. And at the time I had my reservations, but I don't have any reservations now.

MH: Did you go down to visit Senator Muskie and Senator Mitchell often in Washington?

FH: No, it's a long ways down there.

MH: Yeah.

FH: And the plane tickets are, I mean I'm just a small town lawyer. I don't have time nor the

money to buy plane tickets to fly to Washington, D.C.

MH: You let them come to you.

FH: That's right. They do, they do, yeah, yeah. They stop by and they're very respectful.

MH: And do you know Governor Baldacci well?

FH: Oh, yeah. My wife, she and Baldacci were, see, in the primary my wife always chose the winner.

MH: Really.

FH: And she was always right. I didn't agree with her in the primaries, we were always fielding different candidates, so I didn't support Governor Baldacci; I supported Mitchell, who's a nephew to George Mitchell.

MH: Oh right, Jim Mitchell.

FH: That's right. And I campaigned a little bit with Jim Mitchell and I could see he was not a winner. I took John Baldacci over to the barbershop and, God, he was, they loved him. You know, they feel him and so, and he talked about, he said, "Now I've called on Floyd Harding as to how to balance the federal budget, and he didn't know how to do it, but I went to his secretary and she gave me the idea of how to balance the federal budget. She said, 'To balance the budget you have to take in as much money as you spend,' so that's the way you balance it. So she put it on her adding machine and she told us how much money we had to take in and how much we could spend out, and that's the way we could balance the federal budget." And I've got the tape right here. It was enough to bring down the house.

MH: So Mrs. Harding was just as much of an active Democrat as you were.

FH: Oh gee, oh, she was a ruthless Democrat.

MH: Really.

FH: Oh, oh God, I miss her so.

MH: When did she die?

FH: Brain cancer.

MH: How long ago?

FH: Five, she was, she had the cancer for five years, and then she passed away three years

ago. And oh, it's an awful void in my life but you have to do the best with what you've got. You never have all you need and all you want, and I miss her dearly. You know where I miss my wife the most?

MH: How's that?

FH: People think that I'm being sexual when I say this, but I'm not. I miss her in bed at night, because you reach over and no one is there. It's an empty space, see.

MH: Now, you have children who you, a number of your children are still in the area?

FH: Yes, all my children are in Maine except one son, Dwight, he's a lawyer in Longmont, Colorado.

MH: Where?

FH: Longmont, Colorado.

MH: Where is that, is that near Denver?

FH: Yes, right near Denver, yeah. He gets on a plane in Denver to come here.

MH: And your son Alan is the other lawyer?

FH: He's the other lawyer.

MH: Right.

FH: And he's taken over my practice.

MH: Right. And I assume you have some grandchildren.

FH: Yes, that's true. My wife and I agreed on grandchildren though the next time around we're going to have the grandchildren first. Because, really, they're so much easier to care for. If they get out of line, you just take 'em home. And you can put them in line so easy, say, "Do you want to go home sweetheart, is that what you'd like to do?" "No." "Well, okay," you know. So the grandchildren are just so wonderful to care for.

MH: Do you, we always give people the opportunity to answer questions that we haven't asked. Is there anything you'd like to say about George Mitchell for the record that would, any stories or, you'll have the opportunity, I should point out, if you come up with something later on, we can come back and have a second interview or we could, you could write it up, or. Is there anything that you'd like to say about his career that, from your perspective -?

FH: I'd like to say this about George Mitchell – rarely in a lifetime is any community or any entity blessed with a man with the ability and the dedication that George Mitchell has. Rarely in, he's one of a kind. I've never, I used to tell people this, I would tell them, the youngest among you [will never see] his likes on the Maine scene again, and the oldest among you have never seen his likes in Maine. So we are so richly blessed that George Mitchell has chosen to serve this state so magnificently. I used to use that in introducing him.

MH: Thank you very much for that, that's probably a good place to end. Thank you very much for your time today.

FH: Well, I know I'm full of [p/o] [baloney].

MH: No, don't say that.

FH: No?

MH: This was very interesting, because I've gone around the state to interview people – it's, yes, there are some judgments about Senator Mitchell that are very similar from interviewee to interviewee, but in many respects we get a different, everyone has something to offer to this story, and thank you for your contributions.

FH: Yeah. Well, it was, I was richly blessed to have been in contact with him. But of course I learned a lot. Of course, George Mitchell learned a lot from me too.

MH: I'm sure he did.

FH: You know, about taking issue, taking sides, and I told him, don't feel you have to take sides in all this stuff because you'll make enemies.

MH: I can tell from what you've been saying that his campaign style must have changed considerably from the governor's race to the later races for the Senate.

FH: Right, right.

MH: Thanks to advice he got from people like you.

FH: Well I don't know about that.

MH: Thank you very much, Mr. Harding.

FH: Well thank you for coming. You do me a great honor to come here.

End of Interview