

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Robert J. “Bob” Dunfey
(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 February 5, 2010, and I’m in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, with Robert Dunfey, known as Bob Dunfey, and this is Andrea L’Hommedieu. Bob, could you start just by saying your full name.

Bob Dunfey: I’m Robert J. “Bob” Dunfey [Sr.].

AL: And is that a senior?

BD: Senior, right.

AL: And where and when were you born?

BD: I was born in Lowell, Massachusetts, February 9, 1928.

AL: Well, almost “happy birthday.”

BD: Almost, yes.

AL: And did you grow up in Lowell, or you have roots in New Hampshire?

BD: My roots basically were in Massachusetts. We, in the family, we had a business in Lowell.

AL: What kind of business?

BD: Luncheonette and variety store.

AL: Your mother and father?

BD: Well, yes, mother and father, and then the boys worked in the business too.

AL: Boys, meaning your brothers?

BD: Brothers, I had seven brothers.

AL: Seven brothers, oh, wonderful. And you all worked in the business together?

BD: Right, yes, and we eventually came to Hampton and opened up a fried clam stand in Hampton Beach, and we carried that on in war time, till right after the war.

AL: Right after the war, okay, so the late '40s.

BD: Right.

AL: And so down the road you went into hotels.

BD: That's right.

AL: How did that happen, was that, you went on your own, or with some of your brothers, or how did that evolve?

BD: That evolved from, my older brothers came home from the service, and I had already initiated the purchase of the Hayward's clam stand in Hampton [located at the Ashworth Hotel], and that was in 1946, then in '47 we added another restaurant in Hampton Beach.

AL: Oh, a second restaurant.

BD: Right, and also a third restaurant up in Durham, New Hampshire, at the University of New Hampshire, most of my brothers were there.

AL: So they were studying at the University of New Hampshire?

BD: Yes, they were.

AL: And what sort of studies did they pursue, do you recall?

BD: My brother Bill, he was very interested in politics.

(Pause in taping)

AL: So we were talking about you had then opened a third business, and some of your brothers were studying at the University of New Hampshire. And I think you said Bill?

BD: Bill was very interested in politics in the northeast, and he had charge of JFK's campaign up here. And that was quite a time with JFK coming up here, when was it, 19—[1959]?

AL: 1962-ish, or '60s, in that area? And did you get to meet JFK?

BD: Oh yes, I have pictures of him in there (*points to study*).

AL: Oh, do you? What was your impression of him? You were a young man at the time yourself.

BD: He was a great, great personable guy, it was easy to talk to him, and very interested in everything going on.

AL: And so did you start to get interested in politics at that time, or did you already have an interest?

BD: The family was interested. My father, he was active in politics in Lowell, Massachusetts, he was chairman of the City of Lowell Welfare Department, and also chairman of the Board 85, draft board.

AL: The draft board, o.k. So he sort of instilled that in you boys, to be active?

BD: That's right, we all worked in his campaigns. He worked for— I'm sorry.

AL: That's okay. And so you were in New Hampshire and you were running businesses, restaurants, and how did you come to be connected with politics in Maine?

BD: In Maine, I had become friendly with the Muskie people, Ed Muskie and Ken Curtis. Ken worked for Jim Oliver, who was a 1st District congressman, and then Ken went on to be governor of the state of Maine.

AL: And did you work on his campaign for governor?

BD: Yes, I ran his campaign.

AL: You ran his campaign?

BD: Right.

AL: Oh, wow, so you got to know a lot of Maine people when you did that.

BD: Oh yes, I knew an awful lot of people.

AL: Do you remember what sorts of things you did in running the campaign?

BD: Oh yes, I helped put together the advertisements in his campaign, and was involved in a lot of the organization of the [campaign].

AL: Like organizing the campaign strategy and the issues and things like that?

BD: Right.

AL: Did you do a lot of driving of -?

BD: Well, yes, I did a lot in those days. But we had quite an active group of young people who were very interested in Muskie and Mitchell and Curtis, and they were all young ones in the party.

AL: So it was probably that year that you first really, the year that Ken was running for governor is probably when you first met Muskie, or did you know him already?

BD: I knew him already, yes. He was in New Hampshire on another campaign for my brother; my brother was the regional director of the Democratic National Committee. In those days they had regional [directors].

AL: Oh, they had regional directors?

BD: Right.

AL: Okay.

BD: And he was regional director for New England and New York.

AL: And that was your brother Bill?

BD: Right.

AL: Okay, and so he knew Senator Muskie.

BD: Oh yes, yes.

AL: What was your, do you remember what your first impression of Muskie was, or any recollections you have of him over the years that describe him?

BD: I would describe him as a great man of the people. He put together a *(pause in tape)*

AL: That's okay. So Senator Muskie, what were some of the things about him that you remember?

BD: Well, I remember his -

AL: The Clean Water Act?

BD: Yes, Clean Water Act, yes. She's from Maine (*referring to his wife*).

Jeanette Dunfey: He's from my hometown, actually.

AL: Oh, you're from Rumford.

JD: Well I'm from Mexico actually, across the river, but yes.

AL: And I'll just say, since we're on tape, that you're Jeanette Dunfey.

JD: Yes.

AL: So we'll identify you a little bit.

JD: Yes, I just happened to hear that.

AL: Yes, definitely, that was one of the big pieces of legislation that made Muskie as a long-term, important senator. Do you have any stories or recollections of being in Maine and driving around and running campaigns, or is that too long ago to expect you to remember?

JD: (*unintelligible*).

BD: Well he, we had a lot of campaigning for not only Muskie and Curtis and Mitchell, but we had individual campaigns.

AL: Right, the smaller state campaigns?

BD: Right, and we had a very close organization, I thought, and it was groups of young people.

AL: So, you were in New Hampshire and you first came to Maine and you met all these new people, Democrats in Maine. Were they different than the Democrats that you had grown up with in Massachusetts and New Hampshire, was there a sense of a difference?

BD: Yes, great sense. I met Frank Coffin, and Frank was very sharp politically and he worked as state chairman and he also was active not only in Maine but we got him to go to New Hampshire for campaigns there, and Muskie. In fact, Muskie after his '54 win, I remember the first time after he won, he wanted to (*unintelligible*) at our restaurant in New Hampshire. It was quite a campaign starting in New Hampshire, because Muskie was starting his campaign up here, and he had a September primary.

AL: Oh, the September primaries then, yes. And he was quite a speech maker, wasn't he? Did he make speeches in New Hampshire on behalf of people, Democrats in New Hampshire?

BD: Oh yes, yes. And that first one was a classic. My brothers and a lot of the regulars in New Hampshire and Maine come to that speech that night, when Muskie was there, and we had probably about seventy, eighty people there (*unintelligible*). And Frank Coffin was introduced by my brother Bill, and he was short, Frank was, and so he wanted to get some life into the party, and he got up on a chair and stood on the [table].

AL: Stood on the table?

BD: Yes, gave his speech. It was, you know, it was pretty classic in those days. And so every time he'd come to New Hampshire after that, they wanted him to give that speech.

AL: Oh, that's a great story. But now, you also had sisters, you had seven brothers and you had four sisters?

BD: Right.

AL: And do I understand correctly that they all became nuns?

BD: They all become Catholic nuns, and they followed in the footsteps of my aunts, three of them became nuns too.

AL: Three of your aunts were nuns?

BD: Yes.

AL: And then your four sisters became nuns.

BD: And they all taught in and around Lowell, Peabody, Tyngsboro Academy outside of Lowell. And the head nun was pretty strict, all they would do is teach, they didn't have any outside life as such.

AL: No outside life?

BD: No, no.

AL: Were they able to be, did they come visit family, were they able to do that?

BD: Not in their order, they couldn't come home, no. In fact, my father died in '61, and they couldn't come to the funeral. But they arranged to have the cortege come by St. Patrick's School, for the nuns.

AL: Yes, those are hard rules. You also became and remain good friends with Scott Hutchinson. Did he work with you on some of those early campaigns? I know he was sort of a finance person.

BD: Right, he was.

AL: Did you work together?

BD: Oh yes, he worked all through those years in the finance end of it, for the Curtis campaign and the Muskie campaign and the Mitchell campaign. And we worked very closely. He's still today is a close friend.

AL: Well, I got to sit down with him not very long ago, and I went to his house, his wife had just made molasses cookies. The whole house smelled wonderful, as I walked in the door; very, very nice people. So tell me, when you began to go into the hotel business, what year was that?

BD: I went into the hotel business in 1954, we purchased Lamie's Tavern and which, we purchased it from a guy named Alan Tower.

AL: I almost caught the name, but not quite.

BD: Al Tower.

AL: Tower?

BD: T-o-w-e-r, he was a home developer in Kittery, Maine, and his relatives owned a lot of land in Kittery Point.

AL: Okay, so that's where you had your first hotel, and then you went further into Maine later, or -?

BD: No, that first hotel was Lemay's (*sounds like*), then we went to Maine in '61 and we purchased the Eastland Hotel.

AL: In Portland.

BD: Portland, yes, and from that point on I went back to New Hampshire, to the Carpenter Hotel, which was owned by the Rines organization of hotels in Maine, and that all developed in those years.

AL: So you put up, during campaigns you put up a lot of people, particularly for Maine people, at the Eastland Hotel, over the years.

BD: That was to be expected of those of us who were in the hospitality business. Because Maine is so big, and traveling around is (*unintelligible*) up there. So we had to have accommodations for a lot of people out there.

AL: You must have contributed in sort of in-kind services an incredible amount over the years.

BD: Oh yes. You know, it was quite exciting.

AL: So let's talk a little bit about George Mitchell. Can you talk about when you first met him, because I know he worked, before he ran himself in '74, he worked on Muskie's staff in the early '60s, and then worked on some of Muskie's campaigns later. Were you involved with him that early on?

BD: Oh yes, I was involved with he and Don Nicoll, and Don is, he worked in Muskie's office in Washington and was up there most of the time. And George was, we really thought that he was a new intellectual giant in the state of Maine. Muskie was always, he and George were always -

AL: Were they close?

BD: They were very close. They also had a great view of things as they happened in politics. You know, Muskie would have one view, and George would have another one. They were a great team, Muskie and [George].

AL: Did they like to get into, not arguing but discussing things vigorously?

BD: Oh yes, yes, more so than you see in politics today.

AL: Do you have recollections of the relationships between some of the Maine Democrats like Ken Curtis and Ed Muskie, or Ed Muskie and Bill Hathaway? Did you generally support all of them, or more Muskie and Mitchell and Ken Curtis?

BD: Well, I would say that it definitely was Muskie first, and that's how we got really to know George Mitchell, and Don Nicoll – we were very close with Don.

AL: Well, what was Don like in those years?

BD: Very quiet, and he was very knowledgeable about everything that's going on in the government, and he was just a good guy that could get something done. And very quietly.

AL: Do you have recollections of Bill Hathaway?

BD: Oh yes, yes.

AL: What was he like? I haven't had a chance to interview him.

BD: He was quiet, he was jovial, he really was a great campaigner, and he did all of his

campaign (*unintelligible*) some of the people that were, they were a newer generation, let's say, and he was up here almost every weekend, running against Margaret Chase Smith. And he was a great campaigner.

AL: Do you remember Peter Kyros, Sr.? Now he was another Maine congressman, and you were already around when he ran and served. How did Peter Kyros, did you ever get a sense of the relationship between Muskie and Kyros?

BD: Peter was a good campaigner, and he had a tough time in the area of campaigning because he had so many around, like Muskie and people who had pretty well made it in -

AL: Pretty amazing, yes, so it was hard for him to stand out, is what you were saying?

BD: Yes. And he was good though.

AL: [] You talked about your brother Bill as being politically active, were there any other of your brothers who got really active, or just maybe a little bit on the edges?

BD: My brother Walter.

AL: Walter, yes.

BD: He was in New Hampshire, and he was second most active to Bill. He was, I'd say classy, Boston type of a pol, I mean politician, because he had a great sense of humor.

AL: A great sense of humor, yes.

BD: And I became active mostly up here when I moved to Maine in '61, and my brother Bill, he was working for the National Committee and he'd come into Maine and organize the grass roots.

AL: Organize the grass roots effort, yes. And you were all Democrats?

BD: Oh yes, yes.

AL: Because you have some of the families, they go a little bit, they're all pretty moderate but they're a little bit on one side or the other. And I imagine that probably some of your, you and your brothers' children have become active in politics, am I right in thinking that?

BD: Yes, that's true. My own son, Bob, Jr., he was very active in the early '80s and '90s.

AL: The '80s and '90s, yes, in Maine or New Hampshire?

BD: Maine. And he (*unintelligible*) and (*unintelligible*) -

AL: I'm not sure.

BD: Well anyway, (*unintelligible*), he was taking over the same job that (*unintelligible*), he's going to be named the regional manager for General Service Administration.

AL: Okay, the -

BD: The General Service Administration.

AL: General Service Administration?

BD: Yes, that's the office that owns all government real estate. And he'll be, he'll have the same position that he had in the Clinton White House.

AL: Oh, in the Clinton White House, okay. And is Peter Dunfey a relation to you?

BD: Yes, he's probably a lot more active in Maine, and he's active in Portland.

AL: And how is he related to you, son or nephew?

BD: He's a nephew.

AL: He's a nephew, yes. Which of your brothers?

BD: That's my brother Gerry.

AL: So you all kind of have the New Hampshire and the Maine connections over the years?

BD: Right, right.

AL: Do any of those businesses that you started way back when, are they still running, any of the restaurants?

BD: Oh yes, they're all pretty much running, yes. We, well, we had a restaurant in Portland, Maine, exotic for this part of the world, Hawaiian Hut.

AL: What was it called?

BD: Hawaiian Hut.

AL: Hawaiian Hut?

BD: Yes, we have pictures of that with Muskie and a Japanese guy.

AL: Oh, a senator from Hawaii, Inouye?

BD: Inouye, yes. We have a picture of him and Muskie and some of my children, when we opened that.

AL: What year did you open that, do you remember?

BD: 'Sixty-three.

AL: 'Sixty-three, okay, wow.

BD: And that had a Hawaiian flavor to it, and a first in the state, at that time.

AL: I think I've asked most of my questions, but I wonder if there's something I didn't ask that you would add about George Mitchell or Ed Muskie that I didn't know to ask. Any stories?

BD: Oh, it's a long time to remember the stories. (*Unintelligible*).

AL: And I also understand that when George Mitchell was in Northern Ireland during the whole peace process, with the Peace Accord work, he stayed with you at your place there a couple times?

BD: Right. The first year was, when he became majority leader, he took a couple weeks in August and he come over. And that's when he become interested in a lot of the Irish politics.

AL: Okay, so this was earlier than the actual Northern Ireland peace work, this was during his majority leader years. So you saw a little bit of that initial interest in the country and his roots?

BD: Oh yes, yes. It was quite interesting, how it developed and how he, when he was appointed by Clinton he carved out his offices or whatever, Martha Pope and several of the other [members of George's staff].

AL: And so during the peace process, did he stay with you at all?

BD: I don't know whether he really had any time.

JD: Oh, we wouldn't have probably been there if he was at the house, but I'm sure probably he stayed at the house during that time, basically up north and then -

AL: Yes, I know that it was, security wise, it was pretty, he couldn't have a stable schedule, he had to skip around a lot.

JD: That's right, yes.

AL: And so did you, you said he got a little interested in tracing his lineage in Northern Ireland?

BD: Right, before that, we, well, (*unintelligible*) say about George and -

JD: I don't know what time you're talking about. George and Martha Pope?

BD: No.

AL: Did you ever get the chance to meet his wife Heather?

JD: Oh sure, yes, we met Heather, yes, at the events, when he was honored at the White House of course, and then we also, through a personal relationship, Tom Walsh, we have flown with her down to Florida in their plane, in Walsh's plane. Yes, so, she's very nice. And various functions, a Bowdoin event every year that takes place in Portland, usually she's at that.

AL: Oh, for the Mitchell Institute.

JD: Right, the Mitchell Institute.

BD: And that's where Peter Dunfey -

AL: And he's on the board, right. Well, that's actually, I had seen his name on the board list, so that's why I wondered if there was a connection.

BD: And then the other thing I can think of, on George's first trip to Northern Ireland, my brother Jack and I were asked to go with him to introduce him to, who we had an acquaintance with, and Jack Redpath [of the Shankill Protestant Community] was the head of that, [along with leading members of the Catholic community].

JD: The Catholic side.

BD: Yes, and we had a really good relationship with them, and George, when he come for two weeks became familiar with the neighborhoods and all, he really got along well with the Northern Irish because he had the same Irish sense of humor. Yes, they got along great.

AL: That's great. Thank you very much.

End of Interview