

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Bruce and Nancy Chandler
(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 24, 2010, this is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and today I'm in Kennebunk interviewing Bruce and Nancy Chandler. I know that there were interviews done for the Muskie project, so we have a lot of that background information at the Muskie Archives at Bates College, so I won't repeat that information today. But I thought we might just jump into your first connection with the Mitchells, or the Mitchell family, and I understand that you, Bruce, went into a law practice with Bob Marden in Waterville around 1960?

Bruce Chandler: Exactly 1960, yes.

AL: And talk about how you became part of the community and where you lived and all that.

BC: Well, Bob Marden, as a lawyer, represented the estate of John Mitchell's, somebody in his family, and because of that connection he found out that John Mitchell had an apartment above his house in Waterville for rent. We were looking for a place to live so he made that connection and we rented from John Mitchell, and that's how we first got to know the Mitchell family.

AL: And did you get to know them that way?

Nancy Chandler: We did, we got to know them very well, yes, we did. And they had daughters who were similar ages to our son and daughter.

AL: Okay, so John and Prin had a daughter Susan -

NC: Susan and Jane, and Becky, yes, and they were very friendly with our girls, and we got to know the family through John and Prinella initially, that was before George had come to Waterville.

AL: Okay, so yes, during that time George Mitchell was in D.C. working for Muskie.

BC: Yes.

AL: So what was the Mitchell family like?

NC: Well, Prinella was a wonderful cook, they cooked wonderful Lebanese food, and she and John had great parties. They introduced us to Lebanese food I think; we are very, very fond of it. In fact, we just had a shipment from the Lebanese bakery in Waterville last week. And her daughter Susan came out to China where we were living most of the time we lived in Maine, and she gave me a cooking lesson on all the different Lebanese dishes.

AL: Oh, wow. Yes, I've heard that they really tried to pass it down to the new generations, the Lebanese food.

BC: I think so, yes.

AL: And did you get to know Paul and Robbie and Barbara?

NC: We did, we did.

AL: But Barbara was a bit younger.

NC: Yes, we knew Barbara and her husband, and Paul and Robbie, we knew them all, Janet and -

BC: We got to know them all much better than we knew George at that point. In fact, I don't know if we even saw him for two or three years, but all the others we did. So by the time we met George we were well acquainted with his family.

AL: And do you remember when it was when you first met him, what was the occasion?

BC: I have no idea, I really don't. I've been trying to think ever since we had talked with you, but I don't remember how we first met.

AL: Well that's all right. What made you connect with him? In politics, I would say.

BC: Yes, politics.

NC: Well I ran for the National Committee the same year that George was running, and we were both elected, so I served with him on the Democratic National Committee for eight years. And my very first assignment from George was, he decided he wanted to run for chairman of the committee, and he asked me if I would go down to Washington, and he would pay my expenses, and mount a campaign for him to be chairman of the Democratic National Committee. And he was running against Bob Strauss. Of course I was happy to go and help him out, but I didn't know anybody on the committee, I was brand new, just elected, and I went down and stayed in a hotel, and he gave me a list of people and phone numbers, and I started calling, and we mounted a campaign and there was a lot of support for George. He had served one previous term on the committee so people knew him.

And we were up against a lot of money, the Strauss people put in, they delivered roses and chocolate candy to people's doors, and we had no such budget. And George came within a vote and a half of winning that election. And later on, when it got closer to the time people were going to vote, Vi Pease came down, and John Rendon, who had worked on the McGovern campaign, he ran the McGovern campaign in Maine, he came down and helped me. We really came pretty close to beating Bob Strauss.

AL: That was quite a challenge. Especially, I mean at that point George Mitchell had not held elected office, so while he was known on that committee, he wasn't widely known like Bob Strauss was.

NC: That's true, yes.

BC: There was some other guy from California that was running too.

NC: Yes, Chuck Manatt, but he didn't do well, George really did much better than he did.

AL: So you had that issue on the National Committee, what other things did you work together on that committee, if you remember.

NC: Well George was on the executive committee, and when his term was up I ran for the executive committee and got elected to that, so in essence I sort of took his seat on the executive committee, but we used to travel back and forth to meetings together. And when he decided to run for governor, he asked me if I would chair his campaign, so that was the campaign that Tony Buxton ran, when he ran for governor, worked on that a lot.

AL: And that was '74.

NC: Hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm.

BC: And I was the designated driver.

AL: Oh, you were, so you knew -

BC: For the last three weeks of the campaign, I drove George around. Very interesting.

AL: Can you talk about the dynamics of that campaign a little bit?

BC: I'll never forget it, really it was, I think, the most disheartening thing that's ever happened to me in political life. We were just positive that George was going to win, there didn't seem to be any question about it. Because not only was he running against a Republican, but also an Independent, and we figured that they would probably split the vote of the more conservative people and George would win without any problem. But the last two or three days of that campaign, you could just feel the momentum going the other way, it was uncanny, and it

was weird.

We'd go up to a plant gate, and workers would be coming out after the end of their shift, and they would just ignore him. And he'd holler and say, "I'm George Mitchell, I'm running for governor," and they didn't insult him or anything but they just - And next to the last day of that campaign he said, "He's going to win," that is, Longley. And of course he was right. Incredible, I've never been through anything like that in my life.

NC: We had a lot of work getting George ready for that campaign.

BC: Oh, jeez, George used to wear, his pants used to come up above his ankle bone, he wore ties that were just as dull as they could possibly be.

NC: We sent him down to Levine's and we told him he had to get longer pants and brighter ties. And at the end of that campaign, we were living in China, we had a necktie party for George and we had all the campaign people come, and they all brought him these vivid, Hawaiian style neckties, and George says, "I'm taking them up to the attic," he said, "it'll light up my attic."

The night, was it the night of the election? I think it was. His mother had a dinner party.

BC: That was the primary.

NC: Yes, the night of the primary, that's right, who, oh, was Joe -

BC: Joe Brennan.

NC: Joe Brennan ran against him in the primary, yes, and she invited a group of people to her home for dinner. And I was the only woman that was included in this group, and it was a very strange event for me because all my friends were there, Barbara and Prinella and Janet, and we walked in, and they did all the serving. And I was told to go in and sit down with the men in the dining room, which doesn't happen very often in Lebanese families, and the women, all my friends were serving us. And I was getting up and getting phone calls and results from different towns during the dinner, and it was just very different. And then after we ate, then the women sat down and ate.

AL: So that's a tradition in the Lebanese -?

BC: Well it was then.

NC: I don't know if it is any more, but yes.

AL: I'm sure not.

BC: I suspect.

AL: And did you, I mean you saw him win the primary, and that was a pretty tough fought primary. It wasn't just Joe Brennan, it was several people I think.

BC: Yes, but Joe was the main -

AL: Joe was the main contender, yes. I think Peter Kelley, was he in the -?

BC: Yes, that's right, I'd forgotten Peter.

NC: Peter Kelley, yes, he was.

AL: And a couple others, but Joe was the one to beat. And do you have a sense of what it was that turned during that campaign? Because it looked like George Mitchell was going to be governor, and at the end it just flipped.

BC: Yes, absolutely.

NC: Oh, everybody thought he was, yes.

BC: Well, the *Press Herald* on the day before the election basically proclaimed him the winner and so forth.

NC: I think it was the way Longley campaigned, I can still see him sitting on that stool in front of the television camera. He had a very low budget campaign, and he was just sort of straight-talking to people. But he was a disaster, Longley.

AL: And did they have debates? What were the debates like then, do you remember?

BC: I don't remember that there were.

NC: I don't remember any.

BC: If there were, I don't have any recollection of them at all.

AL: I'm guessing there must have been, but -

BC: I'm not sure. There were a lot of personal appearances and I stood in for George at several of them, and I think Longley personally appeared at almost all of them, and that may have helped some. I don't know the answer to that question, what happened, something happened.

AL: And Jim Erwin was the Republican candidate, and by many reports turned out to be

rather weak as a candidate.

BC: That was the thing that really, yes, now that you refresh my recollection, yes, Jim Erwin did not hold up his end of the deal at all. He was supposed to get a lot more of the vote than he did.

NC: But the thing about the Mitchells I think, they were just such a close family, and they were all, all of them were so supportive of each other, a very close knit family.

AL: Are you ever able to keep in touch with any of them still?

NC: Oh yes, in fact we just saw Susan a little while ago, and we're planning to go to Waterville soon to meet with John and Prinella, yes.

AL: So after '74, and George Mitchell does not become governor, where do you sort of, do you have connections with him politically, or have you gone in different directions at that point?

BC: Well of course the next that happened to George was, he was appointed to the federal bench and sat in Bangor. I saw him a few times during that period of time, but not a great deal.

NC: We used to see him at political events, when he was able to come.

BC: Well of course he didn't do that when he was a judge.

NC: No, he didn't.

BC: So the next thing he did was run for the Senate.

AL: In '82.

BC: Yes, and that's when, I guess that was our next real contact with him probably.

AL: Against Dave Emery. Did you all have official roles in that campaign?

BC: I didn't.

NC: Yes, I worked on it.

BC: Oh yes, I'm sure we worked on it.

NC: Yes, we worked on it, and I can remember when, I guess it wasn't that year but when he was majority leader of the Senate, when he was being installed, or I don't know what you call it, I can't remember what you call it officially. Do you?

BC: Well there wasn't any, he'd just take the position.

NC: We went down to Washington to see him -

AL: Be sworn in, or whatever.

BC: His first utterances as majority leader.

NC: And we sat in the gallery, and we were just so proud of him and thought it was so great that he had that job.

BC: And there was a party the night before.

NC: Yes, that's right, that's right, there was.

AL: And people have said he, I mean he's very serious and he's full of substance, but that he also has a sense of humor.

BC: Oh, definitely.

AL: Can you talk about what you've seen as his sense of humor over the years?

NC: Well, I told you one example, he was going to take all those neckties up to light up his attic.

BC: That's the first time that I ever heard anybody suggest that George ought to think about being president someday, and he thought that was a great idea. His wife did not think that was a great idea, however. I remember she was horrified, sitting in our living room, that anybody was actually thinking of that.

AL: And this was his first wife Sally.

BC: Yes, Sally.

AL: She was fairly shy and private, that's what I -

BC: Yes, politics was not her game at all.

NC: She didn't enjoy it.

BC: That's another example of the Mitchell family, even after Sally and George were divorced, the Mitchell family included her as part of their family.

NC: And they still do.

AL: Yes, that's important. Do you have any driving stories from that '74 campaign? Because the funniest things happen when you're driving on the campaign trail.

BC: All I really remember about that was, George could dial people on the phone without any reference to a date book or anything, he seemed to know everybody's telephone number. I've never seen anything like it. And at that time there were no cell phones or whatever, no Bluetooth, and we had an old fashioned, I guess you'd call it, car telephone which he could use, but it was an open line so anybody could hear what you were saying. But George just, he would call all these people up while we were driving along, just from memory. That's one thing I remember most about that whole thing.

AL: Did you ever break down or have to stay over someplace?

BC: Never did, and there were a few times when George was going to get campaign contributions, and the people insisted that he directly take their contribution, they didn't want to give it to any committee or any other person or anything. So we'd drive around to all these people's houses, and he'd go up to the door and they'd, whatever they did, and I sat in the car. Who knows what may have transpired.

NC: One time, we lived in the country and we had an old farmhouse, and George stayed overnight there once and said, Mike Aube I think was driving him at that time, told him he would never stay there again because it was so noisy. He's a very light sleeper, I guess.

BC: Well we couldn't figure out what the noise was he was talking about, we were out in the middle of nowhere. Must have been mice in the walls or something.

NC: Who knows. I remember one time, when he was running for governor, one of the things I did was make phone calls during the day to people in Waterville, and we were working to get a big vote out of Waterville. And then I would give him a list every day, and at night he would call a few of these people that I had talked to, or people that I hadn't been able to reach because they were working. And one time he called me the next morning and he said, "Do you know you gave me the name of a dead person to call?"

BC: I suppose you said, "Well that's all right, we're going to vote them."

NC: Yes, Louis Jalbert voted a lot of them.

AL: Did he?

NC: Yes, he was pretty upset about that, but he got over it.

AL: Well that '82 campaign, such a different dynamic from for the '74 gubernatorial campaign, where George Mitchell looked like he was out front. In '82, he didn't look like he

had a chance in heck of ever coming back, and he did it. What were some of the strategies you guys used to turn it around?

BC: Well we weren't really involved that much in that campaign.

NC: Well, he just worked so hard, he went everywhere, just like he did when he was in the Senate, he came home all the time. He remembered the problems that Muskie had by not returning to Maine as often as he might have, and he was here on weekends and he went to all the school graduations. He really involved himself in what was going on in the state and kept in touch.

BC: He also had a fellow running his Maine office named Larry Benoit, who was tremendous at what he did, and I think he helped a great deal to get him reelected.

AL: What was Larry's talent, was it just communication and outreach to people, scheduling?

BC: I don't honestly know, except I just know that he did a great job in running that office.

AL: Okay, yes. Well -

NC: I don't remember much of anything about that campaign.

BC: I don't either. We didn't have that much to do with the actual campaign, I don't think. I'm not sure why.

NC: I can't remember.

AL: Did you have an official position somewhere in 1982?

NC: I don't know. No, I was off the Democratic National Committee then, I served until 1980.

BC: Had you left the nurses by then, were you -?

NC: I don't know. Let's see, when did I retire, '84, no, I was still working at the nurses.

BC: And I didn't go on the bench until '84, so that was not a problem.

NC: I had a full time job during that '82 campaign.

AL: So you talked about starting to transform his image a little bit in '74, with the pants and the ties, probably the glasses.

NC: And the suits, he had to be dressed up more than he was. He didn't seem to have any

sense about his clothes, but he certainly does now.

AL: And in the '82 campaign, I think he came, people say that he came across more outgoing.

BC: Right, that's true.

AL: He told more stories. And I try to ask people, do you have any idea where that came from, how did he learn to do that? Because most people report he was fairly shy and quiet, but he was able to become more outgoing.

BC: I don't know how he, unless it was just that he knew many more political type people by that time, and he saw how they did things, and probably particularly Ed Muskie I suppose, who would tell stories until you wanted to go to sleep, if you let him. So George probably picked up some of that.

NC: And his brother was, John was very outgoing, and they were very close and I think that was, John and Barbara were probably his closest people to him in his family.

AL: Can you talk about, just sort of describe George Mitchell when you first met him, and where you see him now in terms of how he's developed as a person and as a professional, and the things he's accomplished?

BC: Well it's just amazing; it's hard to believe that this fellow came out of Waterville, Maine. Of course it's hard to believe how many people came out of Waterville, Maine, anyway, I mean when you've got Muskie and George. But I don't know, I was absolutely dumbfounded that he was elected majority leader of the Senate, I couldn't believe it, in that short, relatively short period of time. And with people who had much more seniority than he did who were also interested in the [position], Dan Inouye -

AL: Bennett Johnston.

BC: Yes, all kinds of -

NC: He just had a great intellect, and he was very persuasive, he was able to persuade people to do things.

BC: And he is an excellent politician, in the best sense of the word. But how he got that way, I have no idea.

AL: So you lived in the Waterville area for quite a few years, did you -

BC: Thirty-five.

AL: Thirty-five? Oh, a long time. Did you get to know people who knew George Mitchell when he was younger, outside his family, like friends and such, did you run into people like that?

BC: I'm sure we did, but I don't think George Mitchell was a big topic of conversation at that time. Certainly Bob Marden knew him very well, although Bob is a little older, so Muskie was really a closer friend of his than George. I don't recall meeting a lot of people who immediately wanted to talk about George Mitchell, not back then anyway.

NC: And he was gone from Waterville for such a long period of time that he really had to get reintroduced to Maine, when he came back. Even before he came, his family said that he was going to be governor of Maine someday, that was his introduction to us, that when George gets here he's going to be governor of Maine.

AL: Well, is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think is important to add, or topics that I haven't reached that maybe you could talk about?

BC: I don't really think so. These last couple of days I've been trying to think of things, but I think you've covered the things that I would have raised. He's a very, very unusual person.

NC: Yes, it's easy to see why the president has given him this assignment in the Mideast.

AL: Well great, thank you both very much.

NC: Okay, you're welcome.

BC: You're certainly welcome.

End of Interview