

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Frank P. Wood

(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

GMOH# 196

February 25, 2010

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College. The date is February 25, 2010, and I am in Alfred, Maine, with Frank Wood, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Frank, could you start just by giving me your full name.

Frank Wood: Frank P. Wood.

AL: And I know in the interview you did for the Muskie Oral History Project we got a lot of the background information on you, so we're going to skip that today and go right in to talk about when you first came to know or work with George Mitchell.

FW: Okay, I think I first met him when I was in college at USM, which would be I think 1968 or '69, we were putting on a Vietnam discussion program and we were trying to get Muskie to speak, and I think at that point Mitchell was either the chairman of the Democratic Party or National Committeeman. And we met with him about getting Muskie, and Muskie did come and speak. And then I sort of lost track, and then when he ran for governor in 1974, he came to my house I remember, in the spring or fall, and approached me about supporting him for governor.

AL: Was this, he was canvassing the area?

FW: He was meeting with what he thought were key Democrats. I think he had a list of people and his staff had put together a list of contacts in each county, because I had worked in the 1972 presidential campaign for George McGovern. And so he came and we met, he came I think a couple of times and had various staff people, I think Mike Aube was there, and I ended up supporting him, remember going to the convention as a Mitchell delegate that year, and working on the campaign, not in any paid capacity but as a volunteer.

He lost that election, and then I became involved when he ran for the Senate. They called me, it was right after he was appointed and there was a concern that Ken Curtis might run for the Senate seat, too, and they wanted to lock up the support early. So he hired several people, I was one of them for this area, and my job was basically to go around, again, to key Democrats and see if we could get them to support Mitchell early and announce their support early so that we would preclude someone else coming into the race. And I met with town chairs, I met with State Committee people, and people in each town that I knew were part of the Democratic Party, and I would talk up Mitchell. And then after we were successful and he was the only primary

candidate, then I -

AL: Let me ask you one question there. Ken Curtis was very well liked, was it a tough sell to get people to commit early to Mitchell, do you have a sense of that?

FW: It didn't seem to be. I think there was a lot of people that liked Ken Curtis, but I think the fact that Mitchell had been appointed, people just said well, he's the one, this is our best shot. But there was a lot of the old timers that I talked to had very, they liked Curtis very, very much. But in the end, it was much easier than I initially thought it would be to get people to support one over the other.

And then after the primary, I then went on board as a campaign worker, and my area was York County and basically, again, I was sort of the person on the ground who brings down the posters and brings down the bumper stickers; and meet with the local committees to get out the vote and do that sort of thing. And I was also running for office at that time, so it made it sort of easy in that I was going to the same areas doing the same sort of thing. And so I had pretty much, I think had mostly rural York County, Sanford in the northern part of the county, and Lebanon and those towns, that were my responsibility to make sure that people were doing what the campaign wanted done.

AL: And who were some of the people at the state level that you coordinated with through the Mitchell campaign?

FW: Well, the person that we met with a lot was Larry Benoit in Portland, and I'm trying to think of some of the other people – my mind has gone blank. But Larry Benoit, and I think Larry was the campaign head, and we would meet with him every few weeks to see how everything was going. And I would go into Portland; Portland was where the headquarters were, so I would go into Portland several times a week to check in and see what was going on, and to get names of people that I'm supposed to be contacting and that sort of thing.

AL: Well, I understand in that election Mitchell came into it way behind Dave Emery.

FW: Yes, Emery was very popular, and he had been in Congress a long time. And what was difficult in this area was, Emery had opened a field office in Sanford, and Sanford had always been a very strong Democratic town, and always had produced good majorities. But with Emery having his office there and providing a certain level of service to the constituents, it began to really affect the turnout in Sanford, and Sanford was no longer a given, it was no longer: 'this is definitely Democratic territory.'

And it also affected the small towns around Sanford. And so one of the problems we had was that Emery was likeable, and he had this base of operation which, very smart on his part, had divided the - The hard core Democrats were still hard core Democrats, but a lot of Independents or Democratic leaning people liked Emery, and he solved their problems, and I think that that was one of the problems, one of the concerns we had going into it, was trying to organize

Sanford and the surrounding towns so that Mitchell had a good chance at it.

AL: And so during that campaign you must have seen the tide start to turn.

FW: We did. In the beginning, Emery made a couple of miscalculations, or misrepresentations of Mitchell's view. He publicly said, and I can't remember the specific issues but [that] George Mitchell supported X, when George Mitchell didn't support X. And Mitchell very early on decided that any time they make a misrepresentation, 'I'm going to call them on it.' And I think that's what did it. It had two effects: one, it made the public think, 'oh, wait a minute, in Maine we like our politics pretty clean and he's saying George did this, and George didn't do that.'

And secondly, I think it had the effect of putting the Emery people off stride. It made them a little nervous. I think they hesitated to attack sometimes because they didn't want it to backfire, and I think part of politics is sometimes just getting in the other guy's head and messing with it, and I think that's what happened. And so you could see, plus George Mitchell is just an incredibly bright, likeable, affable person, and I think the more people saw him, he looked like a senator, he acted like a senator, whereas Emery didn't have that gravitas that Mitchell had.

AL: Talk to me about when you first met Senator Mitchell, and then later, did you see him change and develop from the '74 campaign, running against Longley and losing, to the '82 and '88 campaign?

FW: Well, to a certain extent, my first impressions of Mitchell was that he was a very, very straight laced, uptight, proper sort of guy. Not at all like I am, and so he wasn't your typical politician that I'd known, that was a little more carefree and a little more, not quite so uptight. But he seemed to genuinely enjoy campaigning, and I think that was the key. I did see him grow in that respect, of really, really liking to be out campaigning. I still look at him as a pretty straight laced, uptight sort of guy – that's who he is.

AL: And then in '88, when he ran against Jasper Wyman -

FW: Yes, that was an interesting race, because I had served in the legislature, and Jasper Wyman had been a Democrat back then and had been my seat mate, and we became good friends. And then Jasper – Jasper had always been a preacher, minister, not an ordained minister but a preacher, and he became involved in the Christian Civic League and some other very conservative organizations and became a Republican. And it was interesting because then when he ran against Mitchell, that race, I did some campaigning, I wasn't on the staff, but I remember at one of the meetings where I said, "You really should look at Jasper's voting record, because when he was in the legislature he was a fairly liberal Democrat on certain issues, especially labor issues," and I said, "here all of a sudden he's this born-again conservative."

And so that race was, I think, very much a cake walk for Mitchell. He had all the money he needed, he had a great campaign organization, and I think in the end he only lost one town in the

entire state of Maine. And it's funny, I think. I was talking to Jasper after the election, and he said George called him Thanksgiving Day to kid him about the town he had lost, the town Jasper had won, which happened to be a very conservative, one of these religious Bible belt towns, but he thought that was very nice of George to give him a call. Which was very typical of Mitchell, he had the ability to be very gracious, has the ability to be gracious, and knew what to do.

AL: And how did Jasper take the defeat?

FW: I think he knew, I think he knew he was going to be the sacrificial lamb, I think he tried to run a good race, but I think he knew that there was no way.

AL: I'm told to ask you about a story of an intern, and you know what I'm referring to?

FW: Yes, I do.

AL: And can you tell me at what point this occurred?

FW: This was in the gubernatorial race, when he first ran. And there was an intern hired, or a volunteer, and Mitchell had this habit of looking at the newspaper and he'd circle things that he wanted cut out for files.

AL: We all talk about the newspaper clipping files that politicians keep, to keep current.

FW: Keep current, and was either issues or people or whatever. And then someone on the staff would cut these out and put them in a folder for Mitchell to refer to later. And so this volunteer was given the job, and I said, "Cut out the circled items." Well, he cut out the circles, and he put them in a file for Mitchell, and when Mitchell came in he couldn't quite figure out what he was supposed to do with these circles, because it sometimes didn't have the headline, it sometimes didn't have anything, but it was a circle. And so that, my understanding is that volunteer didn't have that job [long]. He did what he was told.

AL: Literally.

FW: Literally. I remember one of his drivers, and again, Mitchell is I think very prim and proper person, Mitchell came back and said something; one of the drivers was driving him one day and asked George if he dreamed in color. He just couldn't grasp the concept of why someone would ask him if he dreamed in color, and did he need, I think he was, he was usually not at a loss for words, but I think he just thought this was the strangest question. I still don't know if he dreams in color.

AL: So did you see over time a little bit of a sense of humor?

FW: Yes, he did have a great sense of humor. Remembering Muskie, Muskie was much more difficult to work with, I mean I think he, Muskie just, things were his way. And I think Mitchell

learned in that mold, he'd worked for Muskie, but he could be much, I mean he could be a tough person if you messed up, but he did have a sense of humor, and he does have a sense of humor, and he's a very gracious, can be very gracious.

I mean, years ago, long after this was all over, I was involved in a museum exhibit that I was the curator and we needed to raise some money and I wrote a letter to all the people that I knew, including George Mitchell, just because they were on the list, and lo and behold, he sent a very nice, large check to help. This was nothing to do with politics, it was just, he just cared about people, and has stayed in touch. And I think, I don't know if you've interviewed his family, but just incredible group of people. I got to know most of them in the campaign, and they would get together and laugh and joke – and very protective of George.

AL: Which is a good thing. And so, if you look at George Mitchell over time, because you've had contact with him for many, many years, what are the things that stand out in your mind, and what do you think, he's done so many things, what do you think he'll be remembered for?

FW: Well, I think he will be remembered for mostly the diplomatic things he's done, especially with Ireland and now with Israel and Palestine. I think he is just a person who has the ability to bring people together, to get people to talk. You have to be impressed with his intellect, he is just a very sharp, intelligent person, but he's able to shape that in a way that makes people comfortable and also makes people open up, and also he can prod people in a way that other people might not be able to. He has a velvet glove approach sometimes to this, and so I think that's what he'll be remembered for. In Maine, I think there are lots of things. I think the Mitchell scholarships are a wonderful legacy, absolutely wonderful legacy.

AL: Did you ever have to drive the Senator anywhere?

FW: Yes, I did, yes I did. I remember, and I discovered something that he, I had to drive him to something in Sanford, I can't remember what it was, it was a sewage treatment plant opening or something, and he had wanted me to prepare a memo about key people in York County, or something in York County, [and] I had to prepare this memo. And I gave it to him as we were driving, and he said, "Oh, I can't read while someone's driving the car, it will make me sick." So I learned that about him. I don't know if he's improved on that or not, but, so I did.

But again, he was very talkative. Sometimes when you deal with these people it's like your job is to get them there and get them back and that's it. But it was like, "How's the family?" My wife at that time was very involved with the campaign, "What is she doing?" that sort of thing.

AL: So he was sociable.

FW: Very sociable, very sociable.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you, or that we haven't covered that you think is

important to add?

FW: I can't think of anything, no.

AL: Thank you so much for your time, Frank.

FW: Thank you.

End of Interview