

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Clyde MacDonald (2)
(Interviewer: Mike Hastings)

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Mike Hastings: It's Thursday, June the 12, [2008], and I'm with Clyde MacDonald at his home in Hampden, Maine. This is an interview for George J. Mitchell Oral History Project, and your interviewer is Michael Hastings. Good afternoon, Clyde.

Clyde MacDonald: Afternoon, Mike.

MH: Thank you for agreeing to a second interview in this -

CM: My pleasure.

MH: When we stopped we were discussing, we'd gotten through the 1982 campaign for senator, and we were talking about your role as the Senator's representative in Bangor. Could you describe what that job was like, and what you, how it differed from other things that you had done?

CM: Well, of course it was comprehensive. One of the things that made it so interesting was, because when you get up in the morning you never knew what you were going to read in the newspaper about something either that you had worked on or the Senator was doing or had commented on, which might be something that questions would arise with citizens, et cetera, et cetera. Of course we maintained an office and we had a lot of drop-ins of people with problems. One reason I liked the job was because one hour you could be working on [something small or individual, like someone] hadn't qualified for Social Security disability or was missing a veteran's check, [or on large matters] like the Dickey-Lincoln Project or Canadian labor or, and NAFTA [p/o]. So you went from the micro to the macro from hour to hour, and was always wondering whether your name was going to appear in a bad way in the press the next day. Which seldom happened – I guess never happened as far as I can remember. *And* you were always looking for ways to put the Senator in a favorable light. Not by, you know, not by distorting things but by pointing out things.

We opened an office [p/o] in Presque Isle and I spent some time there. One of the advantage[s] of having the presidency is that you have control of the census, and in 1980 when I worked for Muskie I had a role in naming the people [who] were going to be running the census, like Julia Nault [of Machias], and Mary Leblanc from Madawaska, [and others]. Well, when we decided that the volume of traffic was so great that we needed a separate person for the Presque Isle office, one of the better decisions I made in my life was recommending Mary Leblanc, because

I'd run into her from the census days. She proved to be an outstanding asset to the Senator, to the state, everything she touched. Eventually, we even hired an assistant for her.

MH: There was that much work?

CM: Yeah, there was. And so, and then I had a hand in hiring Tom Bertocci [for our newly opened Rockland office].

MH: So your role was really, you were kind of central and northern Maine, you had a larger role than just the Bangor office, really. I mean, you were all the way to the Canadian border and even down into the midcoast.

CM: Yes, and I can say that before the Senator became majority leader especially, everyone on the staff in Washington and elsewhere, rightly or wrongly, perceived me to be personally closer to the Senator than – I won't say by anyone else in the staff.

MH: Hmm-hmm.

CM: But by most people on the staff. When he became majority leader we kind of drifted apart from that.

MH: Hmm-hmm.

CM: He was up here less often and, you know, he was preoccupied with other things.

MH: Right.

CM: In a way, [it] gave the staff more, probably a little bit more independence of action than they had before, I don't know.

MH: How did you find somebody like Mary Leblanc or Tom Bertocci, what process did you go through?

CM: Well, like Ida McDonald and Mary Leblanc. Ida was, I guess I'd mentioned before, was a volunteer in the Senator's [gubernatorial] campaign [in 1974] and so you could see the qualities that she has, had – she's dead now. And same way with Mary Leblanc, you knew her as a vigorous, intelligent, responsible, formidable individual in her own right.

One of the things that's lacking in our society is [sad] professionalism when it comes to hiring people. To me, one of the greatest mysteries in our society is the basis on which person 'A' gets selected over persons 'B,' 'C,' 'D,' 'E' and 'F.' And they don't always turn out well, as you probably know, and so what is the basis? The problem is that the personnel selection system can't measure such things as perseverance, diligence, judgment, loyalty, and in politics these things are absolutely essential. And so if you have a great deal of ability and have these qualities

as well, how do you locate them? You can't locate them by looking at a personnel file, I mean you can only [observe] – so direct knowledge of these people from having worked with them was absolutely crucial.

MH: Right.

CM: And if you need a staff person or want to hire someone, you can't put an ad in the paper, you know, because the fair employment practices laws and stuff like this, you'd be subject to discrimination suits and so on, so it was a kind of a delicate process to send out enough messages that you might, you know, tell one person that you're looking for something, and, or for someone, and maybe that person doesn't want it, but you worry that that person is then going to tell someone else who tells someone else, and first thing you know, you get a flock of people coming you're going to have to say no to, and chances are these were all people that supported you, so it's a political minus.

MH: When the Senator would fly into Bangor from Washington, would he go, like, to Rockland from here, or would he go to Rockland from Portland, or, and I guess I'm trying to figure out what your, when he flew in and you were driving, I'm trying to get a feel for the, kind of the overall area.

CM: Well, you have to realize that, you know, like when he comes here, he didn't just go to Rockland, it's a trip. I've driven him to Rockland to events maybe seven or eight times, I don't know, during the years that I worked for him. But it was usually because we might have had an event on the way back, you know, in Belfast [or in smaller towns].

MH: Sure.

CM: Or, or wherever along the way. He would always want to get started around quarter of nine in the morning.

MH: Hmm-hmm.

CM: And we'd finish up around eight or nine o'clock at night, just full blast all the time. I don't think there's ever been anyone that's ever had a greater combination of intelligence – intellectual energy – plus physical energy than George Mitchell. I mean, he was just a go-go person [p/o].

MH: Right.

CM: He wanted to make sure that every minute in that day was accountable. Well, when we were running against Emery, you know, that was essential because we were hopelessly down [in the polls], and that work is a good part of the reason why we ultimately prevailed.

MH: What do you think, in terms of those trips after he was elected, or after he was senator,

what did he enjoy the most, and what do you think he didn't enjoy? You must have had a lot of opportunities to -

CM: Well, I think he enjoyed talking to service clubs.

MH: Hmm-hmm.

CM: He made a point of giving a graduation speech at every single high school in Maine, which he did do -

MH: Hmm-hmm.

CM: - which was an incredible feat. A legacy of that being, that he, he was the last senator in the last round of senators that could have kept the money left over - see, he raised money for his '96 campaign, had, I don't know, somewhere maybe between one and three million dollars. He could have kept that and pocketed it, but he didn't. He put it into this scholarship fund and used his reputation and connections to get millions of dollars more, and it was to be for Maine high school graduates [who attend Maine institutions].

MH: Hmm-hmm.

CM: [p/o] And no recipient from let's say Bangor High, let's say we chose Bangor High one year, you could not choose a student from Bangor High again until every other high school in the state had had a recipient. I don't know if that's still the practice, but that's the way it started out. And these are substantial, you know; four-thousand-dollar benefits.

He enjoyed doing the service clubs and the town meetings. I remember one town meeting in particular in Ellsworth, I think, and someone raised [his] hand and, during the question and answer part, after he'd given a brief presentation talking about the irradiation of foods. [p/o] There was a bill in Congress [p/o] to allow prepared foods on our markets to be irradiated, which would preserve them from decay and infection and stuff. And he was really up in arms about it, [the cans did not state the food had been irradiated]. I don't think the Senator, and certainly I, had not heard of this as an issue until this gentleman raised it - and ultimately we, I think the Senator was partly responsible for coming back with a measure that would require labeling, if you were going to irradiate foods.

MH: Hmm-hmm.

CM: One of the things it taught me personally is how narrow our visions are sometimes, because if you take wheat and other grains throughout the world, that are shipped from the United States and Canada and other countries, you know, to Africa and wherever they're needed, parts of Asia, they don't have refrigeration. So irradiation alone was the best way to kill off bacteria and preserve those foods. And not many Americans appreciated that fact, you know, we tried to explain it to them sometimes. But anyway, the labeling requirement did become law.

MH: Good compromise.

CM: Yeah, yeah.

MH: Were there parts of, and I'm sure that there were parts that he preferred less than others when he was going around to the towns?

CM: You know, I honestly can't think of anything that he was especially averse to, except there were a couple of fund-raising individuals, whose names I won't mention –

MH: Okay.

CM: - that he had to kind of grit his teeth, you know, because they were very helpful to him in a way, and then trying to keep them off at arm's length afterwards.

But he enjoyed doing the service clubs, he always had these jokes that he would tell, you know, the cow story and others that kind of got lampooned in the press because everyone had heard them maybe two or three times. But it didn't faze him a bit. He told these stories so well that even if they'd heard it twice, the third time they would still laugh. He was a great storyteller.

MH: Did he ever have you do work on legislation; I mean specific pieces of legislation, from up here in Maine or-?

CM: Rarely. I think there were two or three instances that I can't quite remember. My role would be more indirect than that. One of the things that I was aware of and was eager to talk to him about is – I guess it was probably the first week or the first time that I saw him after his appointment maybe, yeah, his appointment, 1980 – was, there was an obscure law on the books that [p/o] created something in the country called Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas – SMSAs are the common [name] – and in order to get that legislation through there [had been] a special exception for New England. Most SMSAs are cities like Seattle, Washington; Los Angeles; New York City; Miami; Dallas, Texas and so on, true metropolitan areas. But in New England, you could qualify for an SMSA if you only had a population of fifty thousand people. I think it was fifty thousand. Yes, it was fifty thousand.

MH: What kind of benefits would you get?

CM: It would be of enormous benefit to the economy of the area, because there's a catalogue that national corporations and television ad agencies use to identify where these places are. And if you're not in an SMSA, you don't get a preferred, or maybe any, mention in these catalogues. And so the Senator immediately, you know, thought this was a great idea, if we could get Bangor listed as an SMSA. And so I counted the towns from Winterport through Milford, on both sides of the river –

MH: Hmm-hmm.

CM: - and including Bangor, Old Town, and Brewer, came up with seventy-two thousand people. And so we applied for SMSA status for seventy-two thousand people. Another great benefit was, of course, that these advertisers then would often plug in our *Bangor Daily News* and the TV stations, otherwise, you know, they would not have known about it or it wouldn't have been before them. And this was especially good with *The Bangor News*; it was still hostile to us in those days.

MH: Hmm-hmm.

CM: And, you know, it was just great. Here we did probably as much for them as any single politician had ever done by getting this SMSA designation.

MH: We started to talk at the very end of the last interview about press. Talk a little bit about *The Bangor Daily News*, what was it like to work with, and how did the relationship change over the years?

CM: Well, of course a legacy from the Muskie days was that the *Bangor News* [p/o] didn't like Democrats, period. They hated Muskie in particular, and this carried over to other Democrats. And I don't know if we went through this last time on the Cohen section or not, but the *Bangor News*, this is my reading of events from the outside.

MH: Sure, sure.

CM: I cannot say that I've read anything about what I'm about to say –

MH: Hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm.

CM: - or have [other] factual, a documentary basis –

MH: Right.

CM: - for anything. Part of it's based on conversations with Margaret Chase Smith. I had lunch and dinner with her and met her at her retreat after she retired. And putting all these things together, I realized that the *Bangor News* [had been] up in arms because – against Margaret Chase Smith – because when she was senator she had a great friend at the *Portland Press Herald* called Mae Craig, who was a nationally syndicated columnist, and a woman, one of the very few in her time, the '60s, maybe even [p/o] the '50s. They were very good friends. When Margaret had something important she wanted to say it would appear in the Portland papers but not in the Bangor papers.

MH: Oh, came before Bangor.

CM: And they decided that [p/o] this was never going to happen again. This is when they decided on Cohen as their candidate for the future, to be the future senator. And so in 1972, you know, he ran against Elmer Violette, one of the most respected gentlemen I've ever known in my life, and Cohen won, Cohen defeated him.

Well this hostility [to Democrats] carried over. Muskie never challenged *The Bangor News*. They had hired a hack named John Day, whose job it was to puff up Cohen and to print as many bad things about Democrats as you could find. He was still there when we assumed office. And so Mitchell, unlike Muskie, Muskie would let these things slide and never seek to correct the record or anything else, he'd just rail against them on the, from the pulpit, so to speak, but Mitchell was almost, I would say he's hypersensitive to anything, the slightest distortion of anything that he said or done or wanted to do.

MH: Hmm-hmm.

CM: And so he would call the *News*, or go in and visit them or, but most often [he] sent me. They'd write a hostile editorial, for example, and he'd call [me] and work out what his position was, and I'd go down to the *News* and talk with its editor, Paul Reynolds –

MH: Hmm-hmm.

CM: - and work out a response. Now, I will say this; that even in its worst days *The Bangor News* has always had a policy of allowing critic[s] to respond. I give them enormous credit for that, because as much as they disliked us and didn't intend to use us fairly, they would allow [us] to respond. I used to joke that [in] the first two or three years that I worked for Senator Mitchell, I spent as much time in *The Bangor News* office as I did in my own office. [p/o] We were always negotiating how to correct this or that.

One incident was especially interesting to me because – two of them in fact. They had written a very hostile editorial, it had something to do with the sale of spent nuclear fuels for India. And it was a distorted thing, and mentioned Mitchell in it, of course. And so I went down and negotiated with [p/o] Paul Reynolds, and we were working on the [p/o] second sentence, [p/o] I scratched out what [Mitchell had] written and wrote in what I wanted him to say. And [Reynold's] says, "I, I, oh, we can't use that." It was a rather harsh epithet or something. He says, "We can't use that," he says, "That makes me look like a fool." And I just looked at him, I says, "Well...?" But anyway, we did compromise and we took out that line. Because, but I mean that was the kind of process that I often engaged in in the early days.

When Paul Reynolds left, and the old man [Warren], who was the real political honcho, retired, slowly the *News* changed, and today, and subsequently I think it's a very fair newspaper. [Today] it's more like a public utility than a party organ. But in those days, it was a party organ. And when Paul Reynolds left, they thought they'd hired a new hatchet man named Todd Benoit. So I remember my first interview, conversation with Todd Benoit. [p/o] It was over something again that he'd written or something about the Senator. [I] had a nice conversation with him, and

I remember coming back and sending a note back to the Senator, I said, “This guy was hired as a hatchet man but he doesn’t have the stomach for it, and I think, you know, we can work with him.” Which ultimately did prove to be true. Todd and I became good friends as a matter of fact. I think we still are to this day.

On that editorial that Reynolds had written about the sale of nuclear waste to India, we got in[to] an argument and he claimed, “Well, you know, I don’t just pull these things out of the air.” And I said, “Well, I want to see your documentation.” He says, “Well, it’s down in our morgue” – they call the library the morgue, downstairs. And I said, “All right, so I have free access to the morgue?” and he says, “Yeah.” So the next morning about nine o’clock I’m there, and who walks in at the next computer but Paul Reynolds. And he looked over at me, he says, “Oh hi Clyde,” he says – I had a note pad there – and he says, “Taking notes, I see.” And I said, “One problem, Paul,” I said, “There’s not a heck of a lot here to take notes on.” In fact, the entire editorial was based on this handout from the Republican National Committee, it’s a one- [or] two-page flyer that they must have sent out to every newspaper in the country.

Paul and I had a strange relationship. I almost think he liked me, but that [episode] made me realize [p/o] I was naïve before. Now I just automatically assume that the Democratic National Committee and the Republican National Committees have these editors that are their favorite editors throughout the country. Most of them are Republican of course, because most newspapers are Republican. And they send these handouts and these editors use that as a basis [for their editorials]. Now, that is not true of *The Bangor News* today, I mean they [p/o] have very thoughtful editorial writers: Mark Woodward, Todd Benoit and now, there’s a woman there now that I can’t remember her name but -

MH: Susan Young.

CM: Susan Young, yeah.

MH: Todd is still with the paper.

CM: Yes.

MH: But he’s not the editorial page editor.

CM: Right, right.

MH: Were the coastal weeklies similar, or different?

CM: I was just about to mention that when I worked for Muskie, and when I continued right through Mitchell’s time, I would always visit the editors. Sometimes these weeklies were one-[or] two-person operations most often, except for the *Ellsworth American*, or the *Calais Advertiser* or the *St. John Valley Times* or something, and, or the one in Presque Isle, but. I’ve always had a great rapport with, affinity for people in the reporting business. So I had a personal

relationship with all of them, you know, and I never chastised them or gave them a hard time if they didn't print something they should have printed or something, because I realized that they were under the gun, so to speak [p/o]. And this is especially true with the larger papers.

And so when Mitchell took over, almost all these people were still in place and, you know, I just made a point [of visiting them]. Then when the Senator came we always made a point of visiting [the] weeklies whenever we could. So we had great press relationship[s]. I'll say this about the press, they used us okay but, maybe I'm of a jaundiced view, but I don't think they used us extraordinarily [fairly], you know, just because they knew us and stuff.

MH: Hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm. Yeah, it's interesting, it must be a real challenge for candidates for office now to get their message out, given that the reliance on electronic media, as opposed to print media.

CM: Well, of course that's the thing we learned about very early was that, well this on the Muskie and then just continued over to Mitchell, that we could almost always get a fair shake from the television studios. And I figured it out that this was the newspapers, especially *The Bangor News*, was very tightly controlled for political content. And so if you had an interview this stuff would be reviewed and either get eliminated or cut out or changed, or ask someone else to rebut what you'd said [p/o]. But the TV people don't have time for that stuff, and so the TV reporters were far more independent than the newspaper reporters. [p/o] You'd go into a TV studio two or three, four o'clock in the afternoon and do an interview and your news is coming on at six, and so as I say, the management just didn't have time to go through all this kind of stuff. So we got great TV coverage, and that's what saved us, you know, as opposed to the, what the newspapers in the early days were trying to do to us. I say *The Bangor News* especially, but the other ones were not too bad, I guess.

MH: I'm going to pause –

End of Interview