

Bowdoin College

## Bowdoin Digital Commons

---

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

Special Collections and Archives

---

8-14-2009

### Interview with Seth Bradstreet by Mike Hastings

Seth H. Bradstreet

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/mitchelloralhistory>



Part of the [Law and Politics Commons](#), [Oral History Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Bradstreet, Seth H., "Interview with Seth Bradstreet by Mike Hastings" (2009). *George J. Mitchell Oral History Project*. 178.

<https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/mitchelloralhistory/178>

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Collections and Archives at Bowdoin Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in George J. Mitchell Oral History Project by an authorized administrator of Bowdoin Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [mdoyle@bowdoin.edu](mailto:mdoyle@bowdoin.edu).

## ***George J. Mitchell Oral History Project***

*Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, 3000 College Sta., Brunswick, Maine 04011*

© Bowdoin College

---

**Seth H. Bradstreet, Jr.**  
(Interviewer: *Michael Hastings*)

**GMOH# 130**  
August 14, 2009

**Mike Hastings:** The following is a recorded interview of the Senator George J. Mitchell Oral History Project, an activity of Bowdoin College. Today I will be the interviewer, my name is Michael Hastings. The subject of the interview is Seth Bradstreet of Newport, Maine. The interview is being conducted actually on the lake at Wassookeag in Dexter, the date is the 14th of August, 2009, it's nine o'clock in the morning. Could we begin, Mr. Bradstreet by, could you state your full name and spell your last name.

**Seth Bradstreet:** Okay, my full name is Seth Henry Bradstreet, Jr. My last name is spelled B-R-A-D-S-T-R-E-E-T. In previous years I had been known as just plain Seth Bradstreet, however, my son, who is Seth Bradstreet III, became the commissioner of agriculture for the State of Maine three-and-a-half years ago, and to stop the confusion and telephone calls and letter writing, I changed my name back to Seth Bradstreet, Jr.

**MH:** Could you give me your date of birth and your place of birth?

**SB:** I was born on February 26, 1933, in the town of Albion, Maine. My parents were Seth H. Bradstreet and Ethel G. Bradstreet.

**MH:** What was her maiden name?

**SB:** Her maiden name was Nelson, from Palermo, Maine.

**MH:** Tell me a little bit about your parents.

**SB:** Well, my father was born in Freedom, Maine, went to Freedom Academy, graduated from Freedom Academy in 1903. He had one brother and three sisters, the three sisters never married, and therefore he and his brother were the two boys that grew up, his brother had five children. My father married Ethel Nelson from Palermo, Maine, in 1908, and that particular year, in '08 when they were married, they had a distant cousin that passed away in Albion, Maine, on a farm, and they moved onto that farm and took care of their cousin, who was a widow. And from 1908 to 1933, there were twelve children born to the union of Seth and Ethel Bradstreet.

**MH:** Now, a lot of the people who listen to this might not know much about farming. Certainly probably they don't know much about farming between 1903 and 1933, so what kind of farming operation was it?

**SB:** My father had a general farm. My early years, I can remember that they had fourteen milking cows, they raised canning crops for the canning factories, which were sweet corn and beans, maybe five acres of sweet corn, maybe ten acres of other crops, but primarily it was a dairy farm. And also I can remember my earlier years of them having several acres of potatoes, which I think started out was, they raised potatoes enough to feed their families, but then the most acreage that I can remember of him raising before I left was maybe twenty-five acres of potatoes.

**MH:** Now, I know that in recent years in Albion, there's been a very successful seed company, Johnny's Select Seeds. I'm not sure if they're there anymore, but they were in Albion recently. Is there something, is the soil very good in Albion, is there something particular about Albion that makes it a good place to farm?

**SB:** No, it's just an average farming community, still is, there was very little manufacturing ever there, and Johnny's Select Seed came there and bought a rundown farm and started this organic seed farm, maybe close to fifty years ago. I can remember when he moved in, I can remember another farm he bought, and since then of course it's become world-wide in distribution, very, very successful. But primarily it's a dairy community.

**MH:** Did you, growing up on that farm, did you all have your specific chores or tasks, or did you just all help on everything?

**SB:** We all helped on everything. I had one older brother that stayed home, was not married at the time, and he stayed home there with my parents, and he was doing most of the work. As my other older brothers got older, they went off and did their thing, two of them went into farming and one of them became a postmaster in Albion.

**MH:** So how many acres was the farm?

**SB:** I think probably the farm had maybe seventy-five to eighty acres of tillable land altogether. And we ride around the country now, my wife and I, in these back roads and see these farms which had thirty acres, in a beautiful rolling setting, I just can't get over how, what a life it must have been back then, because you had thirty acres of land all around you, and it was enough to make a living and educate your children. And you had the four seasons that was just beautiful, the rolling hills and the natural colors. And today it's so much different. But it was really a unique setting in all of these farms in Maine and New England.

**MH:** Later, I'm going to ask you about the changes you've seen in Maine farming, but I'd like to kind of move along, and you went to school then in Palermo?

**SB:** No, Albion, this was in Albion.

**MH:** In Albion, excuse me, so your mother was from Palermo.

**SB:** Besse High School.

**MH:** Okay, right, the Bessey Company that still runs wood operations, right, Earl Bessey?

**SB:** No, that was a different Besse, this Besse was spelled B-E-S-S-E, however, he was from the Clinton area and Mr. Besse was in the tanning business, had a tannery, and built this school in 1908, is when he built it, Besse High School, so that's where we went to school.

**MH:** Large school? How many people in your class?

**SB:** There was twelve people in our graduating class, and I think it was thirty-five in high school. But I went to a one-room schoolhouse until I went into freshman in high school, and that was the Number 4 School, which was just a quarter-of-a-mile from the farm, a one-room school with eight grades in it.

**MH:** But if memory serves, Albion was not really off the beaten path. That was a major road that went through Albion, on the way to, well I guess it was on the way to China and then to Augusta, I mean it was the major trucking route, was it not?

**SB:** The major trucking route from Bangor south would have been Route 100, went through Harmon and Newport and that way, but this Route 9, which is Albion, that's the main route between, or the second main route between Bangor and Augusta. Now, our farm was located at a junction of Route 9 and 137, and 137 went to Belfast so that was quite a popular route from Waterville to the coast. If anybody in the Waterville area was going to the coast, they would travel that route. And so it wasn't completely off the beaten path, but it was more or less.

**MH:** But Albion must have changed a great deal when they put the Interstate in, a lot of people, it became much quieter, I suspect.

**SB:** Much quieter, yes.

**MH:** What did you do in high school?

**SB:** What'd I do? Well, I kept out of trouble, and played sports for four years.

**MH:** What sports?

**SB:** Primarily basketball, basketball, we had a little team, Class S, which was a small division, we went to a state tournament three years that I was in high school.

**MH:** And that would have been in Bangor?

**SB:** Correct, yes, the tournaments in Bangor, Maine, which were quite exciting for the small

team, small school, which was one of the first times that that school had ever done that. And of course that's when I met Betty. We had known each other since we were in the third grade, however, I was at this Number 4 School, but she had the privilege to go to the big school in the town [ ] of Albion. So when I went in as a freshman, she was a freshman too. In fact, we started dating and going together our junior year in high school.

**MH:** Okay, now you finish high school and you go to the University of Maine.

**SB:** That's correct.

**MH:** And I do remember from the Muskie interview that was held, that you entered University of Maine in the class, in 19-, well it would have been 1949, I guess.

**SB:** No, fall of '50.

**MH:** Fall of '50, that's right. Did you, was it a foregone conclusion that you'd study agriculture there, or?

**SB:** Oh, I think so, I think that was my parents' plans, and it was my plans too, I really enjoyed the outdoors, I enjoyed doing all these things. I thought I was going to be more involved in the cattle business, and so I majored in animal husbandry, minored in education – and became a potato farmer.

**MH:** Any particularly professors stood out at the university that you can recall?

**SB:** Well, my freshman year, Win [Winthrop C.] Libby was my freshman advisor. He had to call me in several times to tell me that I should get a few little better grades or I might be asked to take a vacation, and of course Win Libby later became president of the university. And Win Libby was from Caribou, Maine, and was a real down-to-earth farm boy.

**MH:** Right, and I think the agriculture really dominated the university in those years, did it not?

**SB:** Yes, it did, yeah. It did lack a veterinarian college, otherwise it would probably have been ranked right up there with some of the better colleges in the northeast, including Cornell.

**MH:** Now, did Betty go to Maine as well?

**SB:** No, when she got out of high school, we graduated in 1950 and she went to work for New England Tel & Tel, more or less helped me get through college for four years. And she was working in the Skowhegan area, and that was my main objective during college was to hitchhike to Skowhegan to see Betty.

**MH:** I see. When did you marry?

**SB:** We got married in December of '53, my senior year in college. And she immediately got a job working for New England Tel in the Bangor office; it's what she did until I graduated in '54.

**MH:** And overall, did you have a good experience at the University of Maine?

**SB:** Oh yes, it was a wonderful experience. The older you get, the more you appreciate those experiences, the more responsibility you take on. However, I did not care for college, I did not care for studying, I guess, and what a mistake it was. All the opportunities I had, and I'd pass them by and everything.

**MH:** So tell me about the senior year, when you're looking forward and thinking about what you're going to do.

**SB:** Well, it was kind of confusing, of course. You know the war was on, '53, and I expected to get called up any time, and so we kept deferring what we were going to do. I took a job that summer of '54 working for a construction company, driving a bulldozer, until I realized that maybe about this time of year, August, what the heck am I doing this for, with a college education.

So I got in touch with the vocational education department at the University of Maine, Dr. Wally Elliot, and I said, "I'm looking for a job, any openings in vocational agriculture?" And he said, "I just got word that there's a resignation in the town of Corinna, Maine, and they're looking for a teacher." So I kind of lucked out on that, so I went and taught school at the Corinna Union Academy, the school year of '54-'55.

**MH:** How many students?

**SB:** How many students. Oh, that was about probably ninety-five students altogether in Corinna Union Academy.

**MH:** Grades nine to twelve?

**SB:** Yes, I had, in the vocational department I think I had something like twenty-nine students.

**MH:** Did you enjoy teaching?

**SB:** I did not enjoy teaching one single bit.

**MH:** And why not?

**SB:** Why not, one single bit, I never could get, I tried different things to do and say, hey, this

is what, this is a good profession, a good clean profession, but I never liked teaching school. But I was lucky to get into the Corinna area. I picked the paper up, the *Bangor Daily News*, in probably April of '55, and there's an ad in there for a farm for sale in Newport, Maine. And I immediately went and talked with the owners, they were potato farmers, well known family in the Newport area, had a nice home. They had four daughters and four son-in-laws, they had tried the son-in-laws in their farming partnership and it didn't work out, so they were seventy-two or -three years old and they had decided that they were going to sell the farm.

So during the summer of '55 I discussed it with them, and they were very, very good to us, and they financed the farm for us, and on the 9th of November we bought the farm and they packed their suitcases and left and went to Florida.

**MH:** Now is that the same farm on which you live today?

**SB:** Where my son lives.

**MH:** Your son lives today. Now that's a very impressive farm, I've driven by it. I mean it really stands out in my mind, in terms of farms in Maine. Is that the way you found it?

**SB:** Oh yes, I think one of the most impressive things was when we went to see it.

*Telephone interruption*

**SB:** Yes, as soon as we located the farm I can remember asking some people where the farm was located, and Betty and I drove down there after school one day and found the farm, and there was an automobile set in the driveway so we drove in, and we were just so impressed with it that never doubted that we would not be buying the farm. The couple had just returned from Florida, they invited us in, and Betty went through the farm home, and it was a very, very impressive farm home, very well kept, and good quality, everything that they had done had been done very well, and she was very impressed with that. But we took that summer buying the farm, negotiating, and I say, we moved in on November 9, 1955.

**MH:** Did you continue to teach?

**SB:** No, I did fill in the school year of '56-'57 in Newport. That fall after I bought the farm, we got the equipment together, plowed the ground for next year's crop, and I decided I was going to raise potatoes. Got a job the middle of December working at H.P. Hood & Sons in Newport, Maine, making cottage cheese, I was a cheese maker, until the 20th of April of '56, and then I went home.

**MH:** And why do you know the date that you left?

**SB:** It always stuck in my mind, I could always remember those dates, those were very, very important dates to me.

**MH:** So you essentially became a full time farmer in April.

**SB:** Yes. The following year, Newport's high school lost, well their O-AG teacher had to go and serve active duty, so the principal came up to me and wanted to know if I would fill in for him I think it was January until graduation, in 1957, which I did, but after that it was full steam ahead, I guess you'd say.

**MH:** So your family had been largely dairy farmers in Albion, and you decide to go into potato farming.

**SB:** That's correct.

**MH:** Was that a difficult transition for you?

**SB:** No, because I had an older brother who was raising potatoes in Albion, and as I said, my father, growing up, my father always had a few acres of potatoes. And potato farming also impressed me more than, as I became closer to the area like in Corinna, Maine, there were some large potato growers, while I was teaching school there. So I was able to do it. And it was set up as a potato farm.

**MH:** Now did it have one of those barns that's half underground, to keep the, store the potatoes?

**SB:** Yes. Again, these people had bought this farm, Bill and Hazel Lewis bought this farm in 1908, and it was the same year that my mother and father had started farming, and they had raised potatoes since 1908, so that farm has had potatoes growing on it for some, about 102 years.

**MH:** I'm always fascinated about how savvy serious farmers are about economics. What kind of production levels did you have when you bought, in the first year?

**SB:** The first year was not a very good, productive year but I always told myself that was an awful good lesson, do something different, do something about marketing, selling your product, and knowing more about what your crop is and how it's growing, and what needs to be done to improve it. And I told people that, I can remember telling people after I'd had a successful year that the first year was almost a disaster and, but it was a tremendous lesson.

**MH:** How did you market, initially, how was -?

**SB:** We marketed it on fresh markets, which was primarily ship potatoes to Boston, Massachusetts.

**MH:** Did you do that yourself, or did you go through a middle person?



**SB:** No, middle person, as well as, as I say, I had a brother raising potatoes and he was trucking potatoes into the Boston market.

**MH:** So this was all whole potatoes, they weren't being processed in any way.

**SB:** No, none whatsoever. So that was in 1956, '57, '58. Then I think in 1958 is when we became very interested in the french fry plant which was located in Corinna, Maine, by the Baxter family, and they were expanding their sales then, that was the opening up of the frozen french fries. And so we became very interested in that, and they became interested in us as young farmers and gave us some real good deals, helped us expand our operation. That went on until 1965, when there was five of us potato farmers in our area, and I guess I was the oldest by one year, we decided to look at this potato chip market, in other words, raising potatoes that are manufactured into potato chips.

This is a little unique, because you have to have these certain varieties that stay in storage and don't build up sugars so that when they are fried they make a white chip, and therefore you got to have a special storage, which we did.

**MH:** So if they build up sugars, what, would they come out as a yellow chip?

**SB:** As a black chip.

**MH:** Black chip, oh.

**SB:** Black, like they're burned, the sugars burn. Now, you got to keep the starches from changing to sugars. The starches cook white in deep fat, and the public will not buy a black chip. A black chip, it actually tastes burnt, too. So anyway, this is how we got into growing a lot of potatoes for chips. Here again, this is one of those areas where times in life when you have made the right decision, because we built this potato chip storage in 1965 and got some contracts with the Frito Lay Company, in 1966, Snowflake Canning Company in Turner, Maine, so we lost that market. And they were unable to build that because at this time in history the northwest was expanding in potato production and was building large french fry producing plants, and so it never did get rebuilt in Corinna, Maine.

**MH:** Let me ask a couple questions about this. Were you just simply, not simply, but were you growing the potatoes and then passing them off to the people who made the chips, or did you actually, you and these other five farmers actually have an interest in the chip operation?

**SB:** No, no, we did not, we were producers, we produced the raw material for them and shipped them to the processing plants.

**MH:** Was the Baxter Company that you mentioned, was that named Snowflake?

**SB:** Correct.

**MH:** Is that the Baxter Company, the Baxter Canning Company out of Brunswick?

**SB:** It was, yes.

**MH:** Which is, the family has close connections with Bowdoin, that's why I bring it up is, I remember the Baxter people, actually I believe the, one of the fraternity houses at Bowdoin was actually the Baxter family home, it's actually on the campus.

**SB:** I knew them, well of course during my lifetime, I knew them from being in the Portland area. And then Jack Baxter represented the towns of Pittsfield and central Maine in the state senate and everything. Had he stayed here, no doubt he would have run for governor.

**MH:** I think the Baxter Canning was one of the largest canning companies in the world at one time.

**SB:** That's correct, that's correct.

**MH:** And when I went to Bowdoin I was fascinated by, there was still on the bank building, on Main Street in Brunswick, there was still an office for Baxter Canning, a little tiny, it was just a little walk-up staircase and a room upstairs. And I thought, that was once the largest canning company in the world.

**SB:** That's right, that's what they were.

**MH:** So more about the potato business, how did you keep, I mean did you have to do a lot of reading, and was it easy to keep up with your competition in the Pacific northwest, or in other parts of the country. I mean you had a big, you had, as I recall, Maine Potato Industry, for example, competed against Long Island, didn't they?

**SB:** That would only be in the fresh market business, in other words, the potatoes that are sold fresh in the produce departments. In the potato chip business we did not compete so much with the northwest as we did with other states here in the northeast, Michigan is one state that is very, [they] were very competitive with us. Pennsylvania, very competitive with us in the potato chip markets and things, but the large french fry plants were built in the northwest, Washington, Oregon and Idaho.

**MH:** What varieties of potatoes were you growing in Newport?

**SB:** Okay, for the french fry plant we were raising Russet Burbanks. Then we changed over to the Kennebec variety for the potato chip markets. Since then the Kennebec has completely gone out, and there's all these other newer varieties that have been developed by the different states in the northeast, and Maine, that make a better variety, better yields, better finished

product. In other words, consistency in color, and high dry matter so that they don't absorb so much of the cooking material, and make a better flavor chip.

**MH:** Excuse my ignorance about potatoes, but are these kinds that you grew, were they little, or are they big ones like I'd have on Thanksgiving dinner?

**SB:** Yes, they were big ones. The french fry plant loved, they'd pay a bonus for large russets. Now the russet is the baking potato that you have at Thanksgiving, and you get bonuses for percentage of potatoes that were over sixteen ounces each. The potato chip situation is a little different; you got bonuses in the potato chip market by the perfect color, and a perfect dry matter, and the least number of bruises that show up when you cook a chip.

**MH:** Does a producer in Newport, Maine, wash his potatoes, or does he leave that to the people on the other end of the chain?

**SB:** Well today it's all washed, even -

**MH:** All washed.

**SB:** Yes, but when I first started in it was not washed, it was a dry potato, they called it, dry potato. But then our competition had to wash, because their soil was so much different. Our competition in the fresh market was, for example, Long Island, Pennsylvania, and the Midwest, and they had to wash potatoes because the type of soil that they raised them in, they would be so colored that it was, and so dirty, the dirt would stick to them. But in Maine the potatoes would be almost a shiny color, after they had gone over just a, we called it a brusher.

**MH:** Tell me a little bit about the differences in, within Maine, in terms of potato farming. I mean when I grew up in Belfast my first ten years of life, and my father had a very close friend who developed a very successful company based on potatoes, and I'm not sure where he got his potatoes from, but I always associate potatoes with northern Maine, with Aroostook County and the St. John Valley. Can you tell me, do potatoes in Maine differ much in the various growing areas?

**SB:** No, they don't, they don't. The only difference over the past forty years has been that when the Kennebec variety was used primarily for potato chips, it appeared that the Kennebec potato would not make a good chip if it was raised in Aroostook County versus central Maine. That is because of the temperature of the soil at harvest time and everything. But today that is not a problem with these varieties that they are raising. I think I'm familiar with your operation in Belfast, that was the frozen baked potato, the Starrett family?

**MH:** That's right. His father, Ted. What I'm doing, asking these questions really to get background. I'd like you to talk a little bit about government policy toward the potato industry, and toward farming, and as a young farmer, what did you encounter in terms of the government, and as your career progressed as a Newport farmer, how did things change, in how government

looked at you, how they dealt with you.

**SB:** Well the Maine potato farmer has really not had that much influence from the government. Only in a real disaster year have there been programs available to help farmers. What we were concerned [with] as young farmers back in the '60s and '70s, was the amount of government money that was going into the irrigation projects in the Northwest. See, they have to depend on irrigation water entirely for their water source in that area, it's a very (*unintelligible*), they have the growing degree days, they have the sunshine, but they do not have water. So the government was putting in these huge, huge irrigation projects, transferring water from the Grand Coulee Dam 175 miles south for irrigation purposes in the state of Washington, and the same thing was happening in Idaho.

So we kind of felt that we should have some help, have had more help in that. But really, the only help that we really got was when a disaster occurred, for example, maybe you had a complete washout of heavy rains in the summer, or a very early freeze, before the crop was harvested and the potatoes were not keeping storage or something like that. Then the government would come in and so on. Some projects were, programs were beneficial to us.

But generally speaking, the potato industry in Maine has never received the amount of attention that they had, especially in the Northwest. And it's nothing compared with the interest that they have in the corn and soybean farming in the Midwest.

**MH:** But they really dominate Maine agriculture, right?

**SB:** Yes.

**MH:** I mean, I would assume the product value, the percentage of product value, Maine agriculture is probably dominated by potatoes.

**SB:** By potatoes, still, yes.

**MH:** Do potato farmers, or do farmers in Maine tend to be both Republican and Democrat, or is there any party domination here in the farming industry?

**SB:** I don't, you know, that has not changed too much since I first got involved in politics back in, oh my gosh, '68, maybe, excuse me, '58 and '59, but that was predominately Republican. And I would say today that, of course in the last ten years it's changed some, but I think probably, it's probably right up in the area of seventy-five percent Republicans and twenty-five percent Democrats.

**MH:** I see. Tell me about your first foray into Maine political matters.

**SB:** Well, I think it was 1958 or '59, my brother-in-law from, my sister and brother-in-law from Winslow, Maine, asked Betty and I if we would like to go down to the Samoset Hotel in

Rockland, Maine. Sam Rayburn had come to town and was speaking at a Democrat get-together at the Samoset, and I believe that was 1958 or '59. So I went down, and that was our first, I guess maybe it was our first political meeting.

**MH:** I assume that Rayburn was already speaker of the House of Representatives.

**SB:** That's correct.

**MH:** And a very powerful speaker.

**SB:** Very powerful man.

**MH:** Was he a good speaker, in terms of giving a lecture?

**SB:** At that time, yes. Of course we were very impressed with him, and I can remember us talking about it on our way home, that he spoke for maybe thirty-five minutes without notes, and here he was one of the most powerful men in Washington at that time. And that was very impressive.

So the next move was then we became involved in the Democrat Party in Newport, Maine, which they had never had a, you might say organized party, we were one of the first young Democrats I think to register as Democrats. And so in 1962 I was asked by what few Democrats there were in Newport if I would consider to run for the legislature.

**MH:** Oh really, okay.

**SB:** And really, I said, "Well I don't know, what are you talking about?" But there was just a handful, in fact there was about two individuals that really talked to me and wanted, he said, "No, we want you to run. We've never, the Democrats have never put a person up."

So in 1962, well actually '61, I ran and I was defeated by a gentleman from the town of Corinna, at that time the district was Newport, Corinna, Exeter, and Stetson. But I was defeated by a gentleman from Corinna, but only by I believe it was less than a hundred votes, out of two thousand, which was I guess encouraging.

**MH:** Two thousand votes cast?

**SB:** Yes. And so that was it. In 1963 I was asked to do it again, and got nominated and had a primary, one person had run against me in the primary but there was no problem there, and then of course in November of '63 I was elected to go to Augusta representing the legislature.

**MH:** For how many terms did you serve?

**SB:** Two terms. See, in 1963 I was the first Democrat ever to be elected out of Newport,

Maine, or represent the town of Newport, Maine, I think it was since 1933 or '34, during Governor [Louis] Brann's terms.

**MH:** And what were the big issues, do you remember?

**SB:** Let's see, 'sixty-, the first session, no, well wait a minute, the first session of course we elected Ken Curtis, too. Well no, they took control of the legislature, so therefore, you know, we elected the secretary of state, Ken Curtis, we elected the treasurers and other people, still had the governor's executive committee. John Reed was governor then. Of course, he being a potato farmer from Fort Fairfield, we had some good discussions. But every time I used to go into his office to talk with him about some potato issues I can remember him saying, "Well you know, Seth, I've been away from that potato farm for quite a few years, so I don't know too much about the real details."

**MH:** So that would have been the Johnson landslide, the '64 election, right?

**SB:** 'Sixty-four.

**MH:** Right, '64, so you actually went in, in your first term, went in as a majority party member.

**SB:** No, the first time I was defeated. Oh, the first time I was elected, yes, right, correct, that's right.

**MH:** So you're a potato farmer, did they put you on the Health Committee?

**SB:** No, no, no, I was on the Agriculture Committee, and of course that was the year that George Mitchell was made state chairman of the Democrat Party.

**MH:** I see, so you got to, is that your first, is that how you first got to know him?

**SB:** No, I knew George Mitchell, it was probably in 194-, I knew who he was, I don't think he knew me then, but during this Besse High School tenure that we went to, and the basketball team we had, when it got tournament time, the coach at Waterville High School would invite us to come out and practice on their big basketball court at Waterville High School. And of course Waterville High School at that time was a dominating force in basketball not only in Maine, but New England, and especially with George's brother Johnny Mitchell.

And so I knew George as 'Johnny Mitchell's brother' in '48, but I can remember, George Mitchell probably played some basketball in '48 and '49 for Waterville High School, not first string but I can remember seeing him there, I can still picture him, yes. And I had known the family, we had, of course Johnny Mitchell was a very, very popular central Maine athlete and the Mitchell family was in the Waterville *Sentinel* every day about something going on there.

**MH:** Really. Now, did Albion have a small basketball court?

**SB:** Oh yes, oh, we played in the old Oddfellows Hall.

**MH:** Did they have one of those courts where the center line overlapped?

**SB:** Not the center line, the foul lines.

**MH:** The foul lines overlapped.

**SB:** The foul circles, you know.

**MH:** Were so close together.

**SB:** Yes, they formed something that looked like a basketball at center court.

**MH:** Boy, that's a big overlap.

**SB:** Yeah, it was *big* overlap, that's right.

**MH:** So it was a real pleasure to go up to Waterville and -

**SB:** You couldn't even make a three-pointed on there now, because it wasn't big enough from the further end, the three-point line would have been out beyond the opponent's basket.

**MH:** I've only seen one court like that, and that was in, oh, where is it, by Hartland, what's that little town that's just north of Hartland?

**SB:** Harmony? Athens?

**MH:** In one of those places, I remember seeing the old high school, and I went into this basketball court and it looked like a square room, it didn't look rectangular.

**SB:** That's right, that's what this was. So anyway, that's -

**MH:** So you got to know the Mitchells through high school basketball.

**SB:** Yeah, we knew them then, yeah, knew the name, always knew the name.

**MH:** How far away is, did it take to drive from Albion to Waterville?

**SB:** It was twelve miles.

**MH:** Twelve miles, okay, so -

**SB:** And we could go three different routes, either one through Winslow, Benton, or -

**MH:** Was that your major shopping center, when you went to, when you had to buy a necktie you'd go to Waterville?

**SB:** That's right, yes, that was our major shopping and banking area.

**MH:** Okay, so you really were a neighbor of the Senator's family.

**SB:** Oh yeah, yeah. And everybody would be talking about them, especially when Johnny became the basketball star that he did at Waterville High, and also captain of the Rhode Island basketball team, it was always the talk of Albion, and the type of family that they were, very highly respected, very hard working parents and everything. But I can remember a little bit of that business of, "Well, you know, they're really not Americans, are they, they're..."

**MH:** Really?

**SB:** Yes, little things like that.

**MH:** Interesting, interesting.

**SB:** But that was the old early prejudice that I would hear, and it would just bristle my hair.

**MH:** Well since you were once a dairy farmer, did you ever hear the Senator's cow joke?

**SB:** Oh, yes.

**MH:** We have many people, I'm not, I don't really talk much about what other people say in these in these interviews, but virtually everybody brings up the cow joke at some point.

**SB:** I know, yeah, well there was another situation, too, in this area. Razor [Raynor]Crossman, who was an auctioneer.

**MH:** I remember Ray.

**SB:** He had a get-together once and stood on the manure spreader, and said that was the Republican platform. And I think about half the people were Republicans there; that didn't go over well.

**MH:** Where was Razor Crossman from?

**SB:** Corinna.



**MH:** Corinna, okay, you're right.

**SB:** Oh yeah, next door, yes.

**MH:** He was the, as I recall, he was the chair of the Eastern Maine Development District.

**SB:** Actually when it started, he was an auctioneer, he was a very popular auctioneer, a very colorful auctioneer, very, very colorful, to the point of where you had to be careful if you took your wife to one of those auctions, you didn't want some of the words, but he was a very -

**MH:** They called him Razor, but I think his name was Raynor, R-A-Y-N-O-R, Raynor Crossman. That's when you first met George, is -

**SB:** Yes, and of course in that legislature he was around as the chairman of the Democrat Party and everything, and then of course we always kept very close to it, very. And also I can remember, you see, when he first started to run for governor.

**MH:** In '74, right, right.

**SB:** That was '74, that was just a few years later, and he was running I think, he made one of his first stops when he announced that he was going to be running for governor, he stopped into the farm one morning, with Chuck Cianchette, they wanted to be sure that I would be supporting him, of course there was no question.

**MH:** Did they encourage you to organize, was there any effort by the Democratic Party or by Senator, then George Mitchell, to organize farmers on behalf of Democrats?

**SB:** Oh yes, I mean there was more of a few of us Democrat farmers, we wanted to do this for the first time.

**MH:** Who else, who would you go to in your, I mean since you said that seventy-five percent of Republican were -

**SB:** There was not too many, there was Ralph Hilton over in Madison, Maine, and George Carroll from southern Maine, who was a dairy farmer.

**MH:** Do you remember where he was from?

**SB:** He is from Cornish, not Cornish -

**MH:** Kezar Falls or someplace like that, Route 25?

**SB:** Limerick, he was from Limerick, but other than that I'd have to go into Aroostook County. There was a family in Newport, Stewart Smith, who was from the Smith family, who

came and started farming in maybe '62, and come from a very long, staunch Republican family, but became a Democrat. I can remember his father blaming me for converting him over to a Democrat.

**MH:** And he's now a professor at the university.

**SB:** He became very successful, he served one term in the House and during the Carter administration had a very high position in the Department of Agriculture in Washington, D.C., and then became, came back to become commissioner of agriculture, and then professor of sustainable agriculture at the University of Maine, and done a great job, great job.

**MH:** Very nice man.

**SB:** Yes, very, very intelligent person. So he was the other, I guess I kind of missed him, because we were always together and we were always like brothers for a while about the politics.

**MH:** But now, did you know Cliff McIntire?

**SB:** Only through, as a congressman and on the County Agriculture Committee, had met with him, we had dinner with him once in Washington, D.C., I was down there in, I think it was '62, maybe, no, I think it was, excuse me, '58. They were trying to eliminate the futures trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange, and I happened to be a proponent for that and I wanted to keep it, but -

**MH:** And why was that an issue?

**SB:** Well, futures trading in potatoes, they felt that the speculators in New York City were controlling the price of potatoes. Which they, you got to have both sides of the equation if you're going to have a futures trading, and I always felt that if a speculator wanted to invest in my crop, or buy my crop, at a profit to me, then I should be able to do that. But the real basic problem was that a lot of these producers, who were so-called hedging on the, by using the futures trading, would not stay in the hedge position, they would get into a speculative position, which they couldn't afford, and lose. And that's what they were doing, they tried to be a speculator and a producer, and that just doesn't work. So that's why I ran into Cliff McIntire.

**MH:** But he was, he had potato farming background.

**SB:** He was a potato farmer, yes.

**MH:** Okay, I'm very interested in how politicians deal with Maine's farming communities. Did you feel that they, for the most part, the people that were elected by the people of Maine to represent them in the Senate and the House in Washington, that they had a good grasp of farming problems?

**SB:** Yes, I think so. Although, here again, I probably would feel that way because I was on the inside of what the Democrats were doing, or the Democrat elected officials, whether it be Ed Muskie or George Mitchell, even Ken Curtis as governor, and Joe Brennan as governor, and I was probably on the inside so, and I'm sure that they were, they listened to us to some extent.

**MH:** What organizations were the real powerhouses in terms of earning the respect of Ed Muskie and George Mitchell, and Margaret Chase Smith and others?

**SB:** Of course the Maine Potato Council, which represents the potato growers of Maine was the organization that spoke for the potato industry, and I will say though that a lot of the prominent people involved in potatoes, in the future of potatoes, from Aroostook County, were very, very supportive of Ed Muskie and George Mitchell. I think these are highly educated people, and they were in it to, you know, they could see the future and what was needed. But of course that was what Ed Muskie was all about, he changed the whole landscape of politics out here, especially in the rural areas. That was the start of it.

**MH:** Now you, Margaret Chase Smith was from Skowhegan, not too far from here. Did you have much to do with her office?

**SB:** I had very little to do with it, yeah. When I was a state director of Farmers Home Administration, back during the Carter administration, I made a point when I was state director to make sure that all of the legislative and congressional offices was informed on what we were doing. I felt that they were representing the people, and the agency should be carrying out what the people needed here in the state of Maine, and I was always close to Cohen's office, Olympia Snowe's office, and found them, found the staff to be very cooperative. And I kept them informed, I think that was one of the -

**MH:** Tell me, do you have, over the years, particularly when you were working as the director of the Farmers Home Administration here in Maine, do you have any staff people on Capitol Hill that you were particularly impressed with, stood out?

**SB:** Well, just Gayle Cory, there's no question about that, Mary McAleney during the George Mitchell [time], and all the, oh yes. But no, I always worked very close with them and everything, yes.

**MH:** For how many years were you Farmers Home director?

**SB:** A total of eleven-and-a-half, I was three years and three months with the Carter administration, I was not appointed for a whole year after, and then I served the full eight years and one month allotted us under the Bill Clinton years.

**MH:** I see, I see, did you enjoy that work?

**SB:** Yes, very much. I think one of the reasons that I got involved in it was because in 1976,

when Jimmy Carter was elected, of course my son was eighteen years old, helping me on the farm and everything, seventeen years old, helping me on the farm, and I just felt, and Betty did, am I capable of running a business other than farming, potato farming, can I do something other than just be a potato farmer? And so when I applied for the job, I had a whole lot of support there from the people.

**MH:** Now there are only, I can recall that there are only four or five patronage positions that become available when a Republican or a Democrat takes the White House, in Maine, and the Farmers Home job is one of them.

**SB:** That's correct.

**MH:** Was it stiff competition?

**SB:** Well, it was the first year, of course, because there were some situations that developed, and of course at that time we had two Democrat senators – Ed Muskie, Bill Hathaway – and Ed Muskie had a lot on his plate and so - And Bill Hathaway was up for reelection, so he had given Bill Hathaway the opportunity to name some of these patronage jobs, to help him out. But my position, there was some controversy that went on with some other people that they thought should have it and I shouldn't and everything and, but it got down to a point where it went on almost a whole year.

**MH:** That must have been difficult.

**SB:** It was, it was a difficult year.

**MH:** Trying to figure out what you're going to do tomorrow.

**SB:** That's right, and what is the problem, and every week there'd be something different going on that you'd have to traipse down and everything. But finally it came to a phone call, and I did not make the phone call, but a phone call to Ed Muskie's office, "Why hasn't this been done?" And the gentleman who made the call had a position in Washington, but Ed Muskie told him to call Bill Hathaway and get it off the table, immediately. So within a matter of hours, I had a call.

**MH:** Now, Senator Mitchell was, by the time that Clinton came in, or while Clinton was president, Senator Mitchell achieved some leadership in the Senate, and so did you see a lot of him in those years?

**SB:** Yes, oh yeah, in fact we had a very successful fund raiser at our home in Newport. Let's see, he was first elected in, he was appointed in -

**MH:** He was appointed in 1980, elected in 1982.

**SB:** 'Eighty-two, in '82 we had a very successful fund raiser for him at our home in Newport. And of course prior to that, I was very happy to see that he got selected. Because when I was in the [Carter] administration, he was U.S. attorney, and I used to go down to his office, he was always so busy that he didn't have time to do too much, but I remember him telling me one day, he says, "Seth, come down and have lunch with me, you're the only person that I can talk to down here because of our positions." But it never worked out that way.

But we did have a case in Farmers Home Administration that he had to come in, administer himself, as U.S. attorney, and that was a default payment on a housing project, and he came up from, I think his office was in Portland at that time, he came -

**MH:** Where was your office?

**SB:** In Orono.

**MH:** In Orono, okay, at the university.

**SB:** Yes, that's right, we were right on the campus. He came up, and I can remember sitting in the room prior to the hearing, before the judge, and he went over it and he says, "Seth, these people haven't paid for ten years, you should have given me a call." I says, "George, my staff has been trying to reach and get the U.S. Attorney's Office to do this for about seven years."

But that particular day, how thorough this gentleman is, how thorough George Mitchell is. We was there in the courthouse, the federal building in Bangor, and we had just gone over this, and then we walked into, he says, "I want to go into the chambers," or into the courtroom. And he stood there on the floor looking at where the judge would be sitting, and rehearsed what he was saying. I think George Mitchell and I were the only ones in that room at that time, but that's how thorough he was in doing this particular case. But he said, "Seth, you should have picked up the phone and called." I said, "Well I didn't call you, George, but my staff has been calling your staff." So that was my first thing, but I never did get to have dinner with him, because he always asked me, "Seth, come in, you got to have lunch with me sometime because I cannot have lunch with any of these other people around here."

And of course then he was appointed federal judge. But that's the type of, basically, what I just explained to you is how thorough I see George all the time, every bit, everything that he's done in private life, public life, and I'm sure he's doing it today in his job.

**MH:** Have you seen anything of him in recent years? Many people, their only opportunities are these banquets that are given by the scholarship group.

**SB:** I know it, yeah, I know it. Well, we're very close since then. It just so happens that our winter home is in Key Biscayne, Florida, and why Betty and I are living in Key Biscayne is due to his sister and brother-in-law, Barbara and Eddie Atkins. In 1977 the Atkins bought a townhouse in the project where we are now, and we were invited to go down there and spend ten

days with the employee of the Atkins', and first time that we'd ever been in the Miami area. Why would we go to Miami with all, but this was a beautiful spot. As it was, six years later we, through the advice of Eddie Atkins, George Mitchell's brother-in-law, we purchased a townhouse, and that's our winter home, twenty-two years, we'll be going back for our twenty-third winter.

And so we have seen, and they still return there. George returned and vacationed there for quite a while with his first wife Sally, we knew her very well, and of course his brother, and now nieces and nephews are going down there, so we keep in touch with him. His sister sold the property in these townhouses that she and Eddie had, but she's just purchased a beautiful home right next door to us, and George stays there quite a lot.

We did not see George this past winter, but the year before that we saw him, and it's quite unusual because we're in this restaurant, quite a fair-sized restaurant, and we see him walking in with his sister and brother and sister-in-law, and Betty said, "Don't say anything, because he's busy, he's been so busy." And when he recognized us, he jumps off his chair and comes over and gives Betty a hug and says hello to me, that's the type of person he is. You know, and he'd just got, oh my God, all this work that he's done.

**MH:** What do you think of this new task that he's been asked to undertake?

**SB:** Oh, I think he'll be successful. I followed him through that Northern Ireland deal, and the hours that he put in, and how he handled it. He's gone over that with us, personally, how he really spent all that time and then finally he just said, "Look, I can't deal with 110 people in a room, you go home and I want only ten people," and that's when it became successful.

But he tells a joke, and you probably have heard the joke, haven't you, when he first went over under Bill Clinton to Israel?

**MH:** No, I don't think I have, no.

**SB:** And he met this Israelite, and he says, "What's your claim to fame anyway, coming over here and trying to make peace between us, the Israelis and the Palestinians?" He says, "Well, I've been successful in solving a problem that was five hundred years old in Northern Ireland, and so I think I can help here." And the gentleman said, "Well how many years did you say?" "Five hundred years it existed over there." And George says, "Well he asked me that three times, and finally he says, 'Well, anybody can solve a modern problem, this one is twenty-five hundred years old.'"

But I think he's taking it very seriously, and I think he's already made some [progress], according to some of the news reports. I guess if anybody can do it, he can, he's one of the unique people in this world today.

**MH:** I always like to give people an opportunity, is there any story about George Mitchell or

aspect of his demeanor or technique that you'd like to mention that I haven't given you an opportunity to cite, with a question?

**SB:** Well, no, I guess I could cite one example. Of course George has always been a very frugal person, always, didn't overspend or overplay or anything like that. So when we were having a meeting in Washington with the state directors of Farmers Home Administration, George had just been elected, well he was the majority leader at that time. So I called Mary McAleney, I says, "Can we come over and talk with him? I'll have two or three people with me." So I took the state director of New York, the state director of Massachusetts, two other people that are the coordinators for us, and went over and we had a meeting with George Mitchell.

And we had a picture taken, and I remember George standing up and looking at me, he says, "Seth, what have you got, a new suit?" And I says, "Yes, I was going to have my picture taken with you so I bought a new suit." He says, "It looks like it came from Mickey Marden's." And he turned around and looked at the other state directors that were with me, and staff, and said, "If you don't know, Mickey Marden's is a deep discount store." (*Unintelligible*), and I says, "George, I can remember when your suits came from Mickey Marden's." And he said, "Yes, they did." But that was the type of person that he was.

But he was, I'm going to retract just a little bit. We have friends from Idaho, potato growers, that we've known for quite a while. Betty and I, in 1988, volunteered to go to Egypt to work with potato farmers, through the organization of Agriculture Economic Development, ADI. And on our way back we stopped in Washington, D.C., and George, now let's see, that was in November of '88, he'd just been elected?

**MH:** Reelected, that's right.

**SB:** But just been elected majority leader, and so we had to stop in and went to the office. And Gayle Cory, I can remember her standing there, and I says, "I just wanted to come by, we had a few minutes so we come by." And she says, "Well George is on his way back, I want you to wait, I want you to wait right outside." So the four of us waited outside of his door for a minute, and I said, "Well we should go, because he's not..." "No, he's on his way, and he says he wants to talk with you, sir."

So he comes by, walking all alone down the corridor, and says, "Hi Seth," and says, "what are you doing in Washington?" I says, "Well, we're just on our way back from Egypt, we've been over there for a month volunteering time with Egyptian potato farmers." And he looked at our friends from Idaho and says, "You've been with these people, Seth and Betty, for a whole month? You don't care who you travel with, do you?" But he was very, I mean that was his sense of humor.

**MH:** Before we stop, can you tell me a little bit about the Egyptian experience, what was that all about?

**SB:** Oh my gosh, it was something that we volunteered to go over. Our friends in Idaho first had the contact, it's Agricultural Development International is what it stands for, ADI, and had a contact to go over, but they wanted somebody that knew something about round white potatoes, which is primarily raised in Maine, and irrigation. Well, they do not raise any round white potatoes in Idaho, so our friends in Idaho said, "Well hey, Seth would know about that." So we made arrangement, so they made arrangements for us to volunteer.

Then the wives, there were just the two of us, but our wives, when they heard about it said, "Well we're going to go over with you, because we want to see Egypt." And to make a long story short, our friend's wife in Idaho called Washington and says, "Look, our name is on these mortgages that we've had on this farm, and I know just about as much about farming as my husband does." So for the first time they sent two couples, man and wife. Women had never been, females had never been sent over there.

And so we went, and we had quite a time. It was going out into these villages, stayed in, on weekends we spent in Cairo, we had two days off so we could sightsee Cairo, but then we moved eighty miles north in the village of Montesoro, they call it a village of over a hundred and forty thousand people, and then their so-called extension service would take us out to talk with these potato farmers. And of course these farms were only one hectare size.

**MH:** Right, very small blocks, and it never rains.

**SB:** It never rains, but they got the deep, deep soil, and they got the water from the Nile, irrigation. But what we really found out was that these potato farmers were sold, the government had fertilizer plants and they sold fertilizer to these farmers at a very, very reasonable price. Okay, so what they did not, what they knew was that you fertilize and then you irrigate, you fertilize and you irrigate. Well, there was all kinds of water, so if they fertilized and they would water, and they would over-water, and then their potatoes would not look good, they would not be healthy, so they would over-fertilize, and this was all leeching out.

So this is what we talked about primarily with them, but it was just an unbelievable experience. I'm glad we did it when we did it, because I do not know whether I would dare to go back there now. But it was amazing, because we went back the second year, in '89, and they tried to take us to different areas, but we did run into two different farmers that we had talked with and they had followed our practices that we had recommended the year before, like not irrigating too much, and doing this, and they were very happy with the production that they were getting.

**MH:** Very satisfying.

**SB:** Yes, but it was, like going back in the biblical times, seeing pictures of what was taking place over there two thousand years ago with the donkey, and the person walking to work and then bringing the donkey home at night, no tractors in the field, all hand work.



**MH:** And I know they, I have some experience overseas and it's very difficult for these small plot farmers, because they don't have larger areas, they can't rotate their crops, and then so their dependence on soil quality and water quality is very important.

**SB:** Of course this Nile delta has some of the richest soil in the world, and they have never had a frost, because the cold weather, as it comes down, has to cross the Mediterranean Sea before it reaches the Nile. But it's amazing how they are still carrying on the exact ways that they have, were doing twenty-five hundred years ago.

**MH:** I'm going to, before we stop, several times during our talk this morning you've made mention of Gayle Cory. Can you talk a little bit about Gayle, just for, because she's a, I think her spirit is kind of behind a lot of these interview sessions, a lot of people mention her, but I'd like you to speak to -

**SB:** Well, I think she was just an outstanding individual, and knowing where she came from, Fort Kent, Maine, I was so surprised to find out that, after I'd met her, found out that she was born and brought up in the Fort Kent area, and still had relatives in that area. But a very knowledgeable person, remembering names, who you are, what you did, things like that.

**MH:** And a great personal touch.

**SB:** Oh, unbelievable, unbelievable, yes, and just a very kind person, but a knowledgeable person. You only had to tell her your problems once, what you wanted, and she could direct you to the proper person. And I always felt that she always had a very direct line to the people, her bosses, whether it be Ed Muskie or whether it was George Mitchell, I'm sure George Mitchell -

**MH:** You're certainly correct about that.

**SB:** But I can only state that I think George today, George Mitchell is, in my mind, probably one of the most respected, intelligent persons in the world today. I know he's the most respected person, because he can go into any country in the world, and they know him, and don't be surprised if there isn't a saint named after him in Northern Ireland.

**MH:** That'll be the last word, thank you, Seth Bradstreet.

End of Interview