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Interview with Ken Curtis by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Kenneth 'Ken' M. Curtis

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Kenneth M. “Ken” Curtis
(Interviewer: *Andrea L’Hommedieu*)

GMOH# 206
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Andrea L’Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College. The date is Friday, April 9, 2010, and I am at the Curtis Thaxter law firm in Portland, Maine, with former Maine Governor and Canadian Ambassador Ken Curtis. This is Andrea L’Hommedieu. Ken – is it okay to call you Ken?

Ken Curtis: Oh, of course.

AL: Could you just give me your full name.

KC: Yes, I hate to give you the middle name, it’s Kenneth Merwin Curtis.

AL: And where and when were you born?

KC: I was born in an area called Curtis Corner, Maine.

AL: Now, where is that?

KC: That’s in the town of Leeds; it was Curtis Corner in those days because it had a post office. It actually was in the town of Leeds that I was born, but it had its own post office so that address lasted for quite a number of years.

AL: And did it have family background ties?

KC: Oh yes, right, the Curtises originated in Tenterden, England, and they came to Massachusetts the first time, and then one of them found his way up to Leeds, Maine. Because they were the first people to live in that area, when the railroad went through and a post office was established, they named it after the first family that lived there, which was easy because there weren’t many families.

AL: And what is your date of birth?

KC: My date of birth is February 8, 1931.

AL: And so growing up in that area of Maine, in the ‘30s and ‘40s, what was it like?

KC: Well first of all, the education was quite different. The first seven grades were in a one-room school with probably twenty-five kids at the most, and then they started moving towards consolidation and so they took another one-room schoolhouse and made that for eighth graders only, but they were still only one-room schools with one teacher, both times.

AL: And now, fairly rural area I would suppose, but were there other families nearby that you socialized with?

KC: Oh yes, sure, there were quite a few, there were mostly farms and a few laborers that lived there.

AL: And what did your parents do?

KC: My father was a farmer, a family farm, which is pretty near getting to be the end of the family farms. But he was like a third- or fourth-generation farmer on that property.

AL: So your grandfather and back had been farmers.

KC: Yes, right.

AL: And what kind of farmers?

KC: A little of everything to make a living, you know, they'd have poultry, they'd have cattle, and they would farm different crops. And then in the winter a lot of them would cut timber to sell the logs and the pulpwood, they'd do anything they could to get by.

AL: Now, did you follow in those footsteps as a child?

KC: No, no, I could see that was the end of the family farm, and it didn't interest me too much. So I went to high school about twenty miles away, in a larger metropolitan high school, to get a different view of education.

AL: And so you went to high school, and then did you go to college after that?

KC: Oh yes, I went to Maine Maritime Academy. And this was during the Korean War, and if you agreed to serve in the Naval Reserve for ten years, the Navy would pay for your full tuition for an undergraduate degree in college, which was pretty good. And the employment rate was then and still is very good for graduates.

AL: Right, and in later years you've had a very active role in the Maine Maritime Academy.

KC: Yes, it was really in deep trouble because it tried to stick to the old curriculum of training people just to go to sea, and they needed a new president. So I went up there for a little while to see if I could change the curriculum, which we did and introduced a lot more courses

and a lot more degrees and a lot more graduate education, which is apparently still working very well.

AL: So after college, what did you do?

KC: Well, I shipped out I think once or twice to make some money, and then I came back and went to law school, right here in Portland. Education was much easier in those days than it is today for young people, because when we got out of the navy, having had a free undergraduate education, we got the G.I. Bill, so the government paid for a big portion of law school, so it was pretty good. Today things aren't quite like that.

AL: And so you were at the Maine School of Law in its very early -

KC: Yes, Portland University School of Law, which is now the University of Maine. And we had attorneys there, they were all attorneys from the Portland area who acted as professors, and it worked out, I mean passing the bar, being admitted to the bar with a high rate, and an awful lot of the graduates have done well in law practice.

AL: And was it a small group of people at that point?

KC: Oh yes, yes, I think there were maybe, I don't know, maybe twenty. I don't think it was more than twenty.

AL: So after law school you started practicing law?

KC: Yes, I started a law firm after I sailed again to make some more money, and came back and started a law firm.

AL: And this would have been in what, the late '50s, mid- to late '50s?

KC: It would have been mid- to late '50s, mid-'50s, probably '56 or somewhere in there. And we started out with four partners in here, one of them is now [an] appellate court judge in the federal system, Kermit Lipez, and Pete Thaxter came in just a little later, but there were four of us that started it.

AL: And so you were practicing law in Portland, and in the mid-'60s you decided to run for governor.

KC: That's right.

AL: What led up to that, that period of time between practicing and deciding you wanted to be involved politically?

KC: Well, in law school I clerked for a law firm locally, and then after I graduated from law

school I volunteered to work for a congressman who was running for election here in Portland, and he lost. Two years later he didn't want to run so I ran for the seat, that I had worked with him for, and I lost by a small margin. The Democrats controlled the legislature, so they offered me the opportunity to either be secretary of state or attorney general, and I had visions of running for office myself and I knew secretary of state was better because there was less controversy, and all you really did is issue licenses and make speeches, which was perfect for a politician.

AL: So that's what you did.

KC: Yeah, and then I ran for governor.

AL: So that position gave you a lot of visibility, would you say?

KC: Oh, absolutely. Nobody could criticize you for talking about highway safety and getting your licenses renewed and all that, whereas I figured that attorney general was a great post but that wasn't necessarily a good post to run for governor from, because if you did the right thing, it created a lot of controversy.

AL: Talk to me about running for governor, in terms of what recollections do you have of that first campaign?

KC: Well of course I'd been through a 1st District congressional campaign twice really, once for another congressman and once for myself, and so I got to know quite a number of people. But Maine still is a little bit the same as it was, it's an awful lot of personal contact. People like to see you and talk to you, and frankly, they like to have you ask them for their vote. I had been around the state a lot, so really my campaign was an awful lot of personal contact. And we were talking yesterday about the cost of campaigns, because in the primaries I ran against the speaker of the House and the person in the Senate, ran against an incumbent Republican governor, and I think my total cost was a hundred and fifteen thousand dollars. Nobody can run for anything today for a hundred and fifteen thousand.

Well in Maine in those days you had really only two newspapers that had much import, it was the Portland paper and the Bangor paper, and you didn't have CNN or any of the television stations. So if you bought television time, it was really around the six o'clock news, and again, two major channels, one in Portland, one in Bangor, so the necessity was a lot less than it is now.

AL: And who were some of the staff that worked closely with you on that campaign?

KC: One was Allen Pease, and he was a political science professor at the University of Maine, and he later became my chief of staff, and then Kermit Lipez, just to name a few.

AL: And so you were successful.

KC: Oh yes, yes.

AL: And what were some of the challenges that you faced as governor?

KC: Well in one sense it was an easy time. We only had veto power in the house; the legislature was completely controlled by Republicans. But they were a different breed of Republicans; probably about two-thirds of them would sit down and talk about doing things, and some of the legislation that we introduced actually was amended by the Republicans, which made it better legislation, and then after they amended it, they sponsored it, which was essential with a Republican legislature.

Maine had something like well over two hundred commissions and agencies, and so one of the things we needed to do was consolidate that, and I think we got it down to twelve or fifteen Cabinets, or, you know what I'm saying. And we did not have concurrent terms with the governor, so a new governor came in, he inherited all of his people, so we got down to where those terms then ran concurrent with the governor.

And the other thing of course was finance, and so we introduced and enacted the personal income tax. We had the sales tax, but a sales tax will not keep up with expenses, whereas an income tax will run a little bit ahead of taxes, so we did enact that.

AL: Now, that was a tough call, wasn't it, because that was between serving your first term and running for your second term.

KC: Yes, I didn't win my second term by very much, very little. There's kind of a funny story about that, because I just barely won, it was a recount that lasted about six months, and then the legislature took the whole issue to referendum and the referendum passes about two to one to keep the tax. And Senator Muskie, I remember calling me up after it passed and saying, "How's it feel to know that an income tax is more popular than you are?"

AL: That is a funny story.

KC: Which was true at the time.

AL: What recollections do you have of Senator Muskie? You must have interacted with him from time to time.

KC: Oh, a great deal, sure.

AL: A great deal, because he was our U.S. senator while you were governor.

KC: Well he really broke the ice for me and other Democrats, because I think he was the first Democrat in more than twenty years elected to major office in Maine, and so people voted for him because the Republican candidate was seen to be a little weak, so the feeling was, 'we'll elect Senator Muskie as governor, and then he won't get reelected,' [but] he stayed in there.

No, I spent a lot of, have a lot of happy memories with Ed Muskie over the years – he didn't always agree with me – but I think one of the things I regretted in retrospect is, I supported Jimmy Carter for president when Muskie was getting ready to run, well not before he ran, but I always regretted that because Muskie was a good friend and did a lot for me. But Jimmy Carter was also a good friend.

AL: So how did you get to know Jimmy Carter?

KC: Well, we served together as governors.

AL: Oh, that's right, at the same time.

KC: And we formed a little bit of a coalition between the states and the governors in the states, because he came from the south and of course I came from the northeast, and we worked on a lot of things together, we got to be very close friends over that period of time.

AL: So do you remember when it was that George Mitchell first came on your radar screen. I know when you were governor he was head of the state party.

KC: Oh, he was chairman of the State Democratic Party. But I'd known George for a long time, because we lived in an area called Loveitts Field in South Portland, so I used to see him periodically walking in the neighborhood so we knew each other very, very well. But I did see him more as the state chair of the State Democratic Party.

AL: And what were your impressions of him as you got to know him in that capacity?

KC: Well, I like to say that I saw him as a very articulate, intelligent individual who had not yet really gone very far in establishing himself politically. He had political ambitions, obviously, or he wouldn't have accepted the post of state chairman.

AL: And so, articulate -

KC: Very much so.

AL: And I'm guessing maybe you didn't have a case with him ever? I know you were both Portland attorneys at one point.

KC: No, I never did.

AL: But you were already on to being governor by the time he was really -

KC: I was an attorney more because I was interested in a political life.

AL: Oh, really.

KC: And if you're going to get an advanced degree, that was my thinking, you could go an extra year and get a law degree. You can get a lot of advanced degrees, but I think a law degree gives you broader opportunities to do things, if you aren't really, really ready to specialize. So no, the firm might have had something with his firm, but I never remember any personally.

AL: When did you get the political bug, when did you know? Do you have a sense of when you knew this is what I want to do?

KC: Well, I think growing up in Maine and feeling how sort of backward Maine was and how Republican rule had dominated the politics of Maine. And my father was actually very, very - He was not active but he was a very vocal Democrat, so I used to listen to him rant and rave and it got me thinking. So I would say by the time, even by the time I went to college I was thinking about it, and thinking seriously about the time, when I went to law school.

AL: And you were involved in the area of redevelopment commission, is it called?

KC: Oh, the Economic Development -?

AL: Yeah, well I'm not sure the name of it -

KC: EDA?

AL: But you were involved in something where, when Senator Mitchell was working on the sugar beets?

KC: Oh yes, yes.

AL: Could you talk about, do you remember that issue, the sugar beet industry that they tried to start?

KC: I don't remember particularly what Senator Mitchell's position was on it, but I supported the idea, and I supported the person who was the entrepreneur of it, because -

AL: Freddy Vahlsing?

KC: Freddy Vahlsing, and Freddy was kind of a controversial person. But what really happened to Freddy was, you could see the potato industry starting to falter in Maine, and he had a potato processing plant which was very successful, and then he introduced sugar beets. But the farmers in Aroostook County were so attuned to raising potatoes that they had to pay the farmers in advance, a stipend in advance, to plant sugar beets, but then they never paid any attention to the sugar beets so it failed because he didn't have the raw material to run - he spent an incredible amount of money building the refinery. And I think there were some as I remember, some

federal money involved in building the sugar beet refinery. A great idea, but it failed. And I don't remember what Senator Mitchell's position was on it, but of course I supported it because I thought it was in the best interests of Aroostook County, which I still think it was. But Freddy was a controversial guy, so that didn't help matters.

AL: Right. Now, when you were governor and George Mitchell was the state chair, were there any particular issues that you recall that you worked on together?

KC: Well he drafted some things for me. One of them was that, when I ran for governor I created a thing called the Maine Action Plan, which was kind of a blueprint. Well, I was young, and one of the criticisms that was made of me was the lack of substance; a smiling face and hand shaker, but lacking substance. So we created a thing called the Maine Action Plan, and I know that George drafted the chapter on state government, a chapter of the Maine Action Plan, and he drafted that for us, which later became one of the ten items in the Maine Action Plan. So he helped me in things like that a great deal, again, because he was very articulate, very intelligent and a great resource. I don't know that we ever really disagreed on much of anything, but we certainly agreed enough to help me on a lot of things.

AL: So tell me, you left the governorship in '74?

KC: 'Seventy-five.

AL: 'Seventy-five, and Longley became governor, Jim Longley, and you went off to do what at that point?

KC: Let me think, what did I do in '75? I think I went with the Federal Area Redevelopment Administration, I was a state coordinator for that. And then Jimmy Carter got elected, and he appointed me chairman of the Democratic National Committee. I only stayed about two years on that, and then he appointed me ambassador to Canada.

AL: Okay, so that happened during the Carter administration.

KC: During the Carter administration, yes. But now George, one of the things I think is worth mentioning, George ran for governor in 1974, and he lost to Jim Longley. I always thought this was a little ironic, because George was such a strong supporter of Senator Muskie's bid for president. And a fellow named Bob Monks, and I think he was chairman of the Republican Party at the time, they were all so afraid that with Muskie on the ballot that the Republican Party would lose its seats in Maine. So in Maine we had a thing called straight party voting, 'big box' they used to call it, so the Republicans abolished the big box, because of their fear of Senator Muskie, who was George's friend. And so that's what cost George the election as governor, because that's how Longley won, because there was no straight party voting any more. And so that's how that all happened.

AL: So that was a big change.

KC: But it was kind of ironic, because it was George's association with Senator Muskie that probably cost him the governorship in a totally indirect manner.

AL: And can you talk a little bit about your experiences as chair of the National Democratic Committee, because that's quite a powerful position, and also must be, political strategy must be extremely important too.

KC: Well I learned a lot, and one thing I learned right away is, number one, you really don't want to be chairman of a party when the president is the same party, because if anybody wants to talk about policy, or talk about appointments or talk about anything, they're going to go to the White House, they aren't going to spend a lot of time with the chairman of the Democratic Party. And the other thing is that, I think to be successful as a chairman of a party, you need to have a certain amount of financial resources, because it's terribly time consuming and terribly costly, and raising money is terribly difficult. And I didn't have any of those characteristics, so I inherited a large staff of the Democratic National Committee, and no money to operate the committee, so I realized a couple years on that I had made a big mistake and left. But Jimmy Carter and I remain strong friends, and later on he did appoint me to be ambassador to Canada.

AL: And what was that experience like?

KC: Well, that was a tremendous experience, because I don't think the United States has a better relationship with any country in the world than they do Canada, or more things in common. And I still remember when our government wanted to contact the Canadian government about anything, we had such a strong personal relationship, you would just make a copy of the instructions to convey to the Canadians and hand it to them, that was the kind of relationship we had.

AL: And did you actually have to live in Canada?

KC: Oh yes, we lived in Ottawa, which was not hard living.

AL: And then that brings us to around 1980, when Joe Brennan was governor and Senator Muskie accepted the appointment to be secretary of state under Carter, and his Senate seat became vacated and George Mitchell was appointed. Were you interested in that seat at that time, that Senate seat, or what was your political thinking? I mean you'd been ambassador and governor.

KC: I probably would have been foolish enough to take it, but I didn't pursue it in any great way. And history would record that there was an Indian Land Claims case against the state, and I supported the Indians and Governor Brennan didn't, and that was one issue he was very angry at me about. And the other issue he was angry with me about is a public comment I made, not knowing what it was about. He didn't reappoint someone as a judge, and I didn't know what the history was, and the press contacted me and I said, "All I can tell you is we always had a history

that once somebody accepted a judicial appointment, if they did a good job they could count on being reappointed, as a reward for giving up their law practice.” And so I didn’t realize that he had just not reappointed someone. And he held those two things against me.

But I think my personality is such that I would not have made a good senator. I liked the governorship because it was more activist oriented. And certainly George was far more articulate than I ever thought about being, and that’s the place for a senator, George was extremely articulate and had a great judicial temperament. And he had political ambition, which history will prove, and that’s the perfect background for a United States senator, which proved to be true because he became a great senator.

AL: Over the years, have you observed him or had contact with him during his Senate years and later?

KC: Not an awful lot, no, not as much. And after that of course, let’s see, I’m forgetting the year that Muskie ran for vice president.

AL: ‘Sixty-eight.

KC: That was ‘68, you’re right, because I worked with George a little on that. But not a lot of contact, because he sort of went his own way and I sort of came home, but I did stay in touch a little bit.

AL: If you look at George Mitchell’s career, what are the things about him that stand out to you? I know you’ve said articulate, are there other characteristics that stick out in your mind?

KC: No, I think articulate would sum it up better than anything; intelligent and articulate. He was able obviously to work and impress his colleagues, which led to his being elected the Senate majority leader. And then I think in later years he became, in commercial life, chairman of Disney World Corporation, which is a large corporation, and then of course his appointment in Ireland, and his latest appointment in the Middle East. So he obviously was able to impress people he came in contact with, with his ability, his intelligence and his ability to work with others.

AL: You live mostly out of the state and come back to Maine from time to time, in the later years. How do you see Maine has changed since you grew up?

KC: Well, I’ve only been gone about four years. I just came to the conclusion that there comes a time in your life not to try to be so strong. And Maine has changed a little, not much. Its basic industries have changed and they’re gone, like the forest products industries, and fisheries are declining, fish processing, and textiles, those were the bases of the state of Maine. I think now it’s probably more tourism than a lot of things that, throughout Maine, have increased land values. But it’s having a tough time, no question about it. And it’s still a beautiful state, people still love it, but economically, it’s difficult.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think is important to add, something I missed?

KC: No, I can't think of anything, thank you.

AL: All right.

KC: I appreciate the chance to talk to you.

AL: Thank you so much.

End of Interview