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Interview with Paul Maroon by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Paul P. Maroon

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Paul P. Maroon
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

GMOH# 203
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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 March 31, 2010, this is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and today I'm doing a telephone interview with Paul Maroon in Florida. Paul, could you start just by giving me your full name.

Paul Maroon: My name is Paul P. Maroon.

AL: And is that spelled M-A-R-O-O-N?

PM: Right.

AL: And where and when were you born?

PM: I was born in Waterville, Maine, January 19, 1932.

AL: And did you grow up in the Waterville area?

PM: Yes.

AL: What was it like in the '30s and the '40s?

PM: In the '40s, Waterville was a booming area, it had businesses, [] [and] a lot of woolen mills and cotton mills that were running []. We had a lot of salesmen used to come in and stay overnight from out of Boston area, and they'd do their work in Waterville and Bangor area, they would stay in Waterville at night time, because it was a booming city.

AL: Right, and what part of Waterville did you live in?

PM: I lived down in the, let's say in the [eastern] part near the banks of the Kennebec River; it was called Front Street [area].

AL: Right on Front Street, yes.

PM: In the area, it was off Front Street, it was on Hathaway Street, it's one block away from Front Street, actually about one block away from George Mitchell's home.

AL: Really, and so was that part of the Lebanese community in Waterville?

PM: Right. The Lebanese community was made up of men and women that came from Lebanon and settled in the Waterville area to work at the mills. And there's a railroad station, and the city was made up of seven wards, which they had councilmen, [] and the Lebanese people settled in the wards three and four [].

AL: And what were your parents' names?

PM: My parents' name was Sam and Nimera Maroon.

AL: How do you spell your mom's first name?

PM: N-I-M-E-R-A.

AL: Okay, and what did they do?

PM: My mother's from Lebanon, the same area that George Mitchell's mother's home town, called Bkassine.

AL: And did they know each other well?

PM: I guess when they were kids, but when they came to Waterville, that's how we got involved more with their family.

AL: Okay, what did your parents -

PM: In Lebanon there's a small town, just like probably, I'm trying to figure out a town where you might, a little small village, not more than probably a thousand people in that village. In those days, they didn't have any automobiles or anything like that, they all stuck together.

AL: Right, and what did your parents do for work?

PM: My father worked for the Wyandotte Worsted Mills, and he retired from there.

AL: And your mom, did she stay home?

PM: She was an at-home mom.

AL: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

PM: We had two girls and six boys.

AL: Oh, wow, so it was a big family.

PM: Right.

AL: What did you all do for fun?

PM: The kids?

AL: Yes.

PM: Oh, we played sandlot baseball, football, [and basketball] in the neighborhood, and we played cops and robbers and things like that, like all the kids do.

AL: And so were there lots of kids in the neighborhood to play with?

PM: Quite a bit. Even though we were like a segregated community, we had our own church called the St. Joseph Maronite Church, and we had our own school up to eighth grade, taught by the Mount Mercy nuns. And we had grades one to eight []. There were three classes, and they were made up of one-two-three, four-five-six, seven-eight.

AL: And then where did you go to high school?

PM: Waterville High School. In the [ninth] grade we went to Waterville Junior High School, we stayed there in the ninth grade, then went to Waterville High School ten, eleventh, twelfth grade.

AL: Okay, so can you talk about what some of the Lebanese traditions were in your family and in the community?

PM: Well in my family, we used to go to church every Sunday morning, and after Mass we used to go home and my mother had specials [treats] for all the kids. We would change into our clothes and play football in the parking lot, and go there until the [next] Mass was over with [and] wait for the other kids to get out.

AL: And what were some of the foods that you remember from childhood?

PM: Well we had what we call baked kibbeh, and we had raw kibbeh, it's made up of raw hamburger, real meat or some real lamb a lot in those days. Today we'd probably use regular meat, fresh meat, but in those days my mother used to have a man come in every Saturday, and he'd come in with some lamb, different types of lamb leg, rack of lambs, and she'd make him cut it all up and make meals during the [week]. [] On weekdays we would have baked kibbeh, we'd have rolled cabbage, we would have summer squash, a special Lebanese squash that they used to make. We made salads and different things like that. We had cookies, we used to have Christmas time, you make a special luncheon. At Easter time we'd make a special, what they

call Easter cookies, made of nuts and dates.

AL: And were those traditions passed down in your generation?

PM: Quite a bit. In fact, my brothers, they're married with different, French and Polish girls, and my mother [still] taught them everything so they keep the tradition as much as they could.

AL: Oh, that's great. Talk about your family's relationship to the Mitchells, when you were growing up.

PM: Well, we were very good, close friends. Everybody was, when you're growing up everybody in that community, even though we were segregated, but we still were integrated with a lot of the French people in our neighborhood. But we grew up together like, everybody was cousins and everybody was aunts and uncles. We called everybody aunt and everybody uncle, and we all seemed like we were all cousins.

AL: And did you get a sense of George Mitchell's parents? What were they like?

PM: The father was, he was adopted, and he spoke better Arabic than some of the Lebanese people that was living there.

AL: Was he around a lot?

PM: And he was friendly. Yes, he was a hard working man, we'd get to know him and see him at church and things like that, and at the ceremonies. And we used to have a lot of affairs that the church would be putting on, suppers and stuff like that, we'd see each other.

AL: And did you get to know George Mitchell himself? You were about the same age.

PM: He was a couple years younger than us, but he jumped a grade I guess, it was in the fifth and sixth grades, that's when he came up with us. But he was the same age as my younger brother Louis. But we all played together, like we'd make up teams together, my brother and I are twins, my brother Peter. We used to be the biggest guys on the block of all the kids practically, and we would make up teams, so my brother and I would always be captains because we never wanted to be on the same team. And we would always pick up my brother Louis and George at the end, because they were the smallest, scrawniest guys and the slowest.

AL: And you probably knew Johnny and Paul as well, or Robbie?

PM: Yes, I knew Robbie very well. Robbie's more my age, but when they started the Maronite school where they put us all in different grades, the way we were aged, and Robbie was about two or three months older than us, so they put him in the grade ahead of us when we started.

AL: So what was Robbie like, growing up?

PM: He was a nice guy, he was a very personable guy. He was a good basketball player, just like his brother Johnny. And we were all like brothers, really.

AL: Do you have any stories from those times, any stories that you remember that were funny or -?

PM: May 9th of 1992 the Chamber of Commerce started an annual program where they honored George Mitchell as a, like “This is your life.” And they called on me to write something about him as we grew up, so I’ll read something to you what I wrote that night. I started off, “George, do you remember?” We used to call him Georgie, “Georgie, do you remember the old Front Street gang? Remember when we all stood in front of your father’s house on Front Street and waved to the passengers on the passing trains? You were politicking then. Remember playing baseball in the gravel at St. Joseph’s Maronite school yard? Football on Hathaway Street? Remember when we played basketball at the Boys’ Club? Remember the tire swing behind your house, where the American Legion Home parking lot is today? Remember the first cigar that you had a first puff? Remember the picnic at Mt. Mercy grounds? Remember the time you realized I was a twin and could not tell apart my brother and me? Remember when we played sandlot ball? Peter and I were always the captains, Peter and I always argued about having you and our brother Louis on our team, as both of you were very small and very slow.”

“Georgie, do you remember the time you shoveled dirt in the building of St. Joseph’s Maronite church? The shovel was bigger than you. Remember when you were selected as teacher’s pet and had the privilege of cleaning the blackboards? And remember the big tree that we used to play in? They knocked that down. And here’s the gun that they found for you – there was a gun that we had, it was a rubber tube and we used to strap it on this [piece of] wood that we used to make up. He wanted that, and he kept that as a souvenir. Then I myself realized that God had important plans for this scrawny little kid from Front Street. Little did we know that this particular kid would grow up to be one of our great leaders of our country. You made us proud of you, and keep on climbing. May it comfort you to know that you always have the love and support of the old Front Street gang.”

And then someone else took over from there.

AL: Oh, that’s nice. So that was sort of a local Waterville -

PM: Chamber of Commerce. It’s May 9th, 1992, there was a clipping in the newspaper where they even quoted in some of those things.

AL: Now after those high school years, did you have contact with him?

PM: Well, we all went in the service afterwards, and we knew where everybody was. In fact, I had his mother’s address in my black book, to send them letters and stuff like that. But we kept

in touch with him, but not with the family. My brother and I went into the service, and George went to college, too, and then he went into the service. My brother and I went from high school because we were almost ready to be called into the Korean War, so we left and he [Peter Maroon] selected the Air Force; I selected the Navy.

AL: Right, and did you come back to Waterville after your service in the navy?

PM: Yes, I did, came back from the service, went to college at Husson College. We haven't seen each other for a while, but every year though we would go to his brother-in-law's house – his name was Ed Atkins, and his sister's, Barbara's house. Eevery year at Super Bowl day, we would all have about twenty, twenty-five of his friends over with a roast dinner, and we would watch the game. Meantime, some of us would play cribbage and tell times of the old days, and we'd talk about everything else and what we ate in those days. Then we went, for years Mary and I worked on George's campaigns, we did fund-raising for him.

AL: Oh yeah, I was going to ask you about that, the Senate campaigns?

PM: First it was the governor's campaign.

AL: So what do you remember from that? That was in 1974; what do you remember about that campaign?

PM: Well, I remember one day my wife saw him at the supermarket and said, "Jeez, George, you got to get moving, come to Waterville more often because," she said, what's the name, governor [opponent]?

AL: Longley?

PM: Longley was coming into Waterville every day practically, and so she was telling him that we were worried about the campaign. And one thing was we were on our way at the end, on Election Day, to Portland, we heard on the radio that he had lost. We were upset about that, and we got to the campaign office in Portland, everybody was quiet and was all upset about it, but it worked out to be the best thing for him; he became senator, and then he was majority leader.

AL: Right, and in terms of fund-raising, how did you go about doing that in the '70s, what sort of was the protocol?

PM: I worked with George, I worked with Robbie then, and we'd put a luncheon on, at night time we'd have a buffet or something like that, and that's how we did it. Then the time that, Election Day we drove people to the election headquarters, we drove them around, picked up people to vote.

AL: Right, so when you look at George Mitchell's career, what stands out in terms of your perspective?

PM: Well first of all, I think George is a great guy and very personable and very sincere, very educated. And I got to say this, he took time off from [] [the] Senate [] [and] came to my twenty-fifth anniversary. That's how close we are. Then he invited me, my brother Peter and my brother Louis, of all the people [from] our class, as kids were concerned, he invited us to his installation [as Senate majority leader] in Washington, which we attended.

AL: Was that as senator, or majority leader?

PM: When he was majority leader. And he introduced us to his party colleagues at the Senate after he was installed, they had a party in the next room, and we were there too.

AL: Is there anything I haven't asked you that you think is important to add, maybe something that you wrote down that I don't know to ask about?

PM: Before I forget something, I'd like to say this. He was a high achiever in high school, and he was vice president of our class. We played basketball together in high school, and we played basketball in the Boys' Club, and when we were in grammar school, we had a grammar school team and the coach was his brother Johnny, which we called the Swisher. So we were all ballplayers, you know, we were all just like cousins. And I followed him all through his success in his Senate work, and also the time of his involvement with the Ireland peace work. And while we're talking about Ireland peace work, I haven't seen George in, you know, I moved here [to Florida] about [] fifteen years ago, and I haven't seen George that much. I probably saw him once or twice, and when I went to Waterville I saw him.

But I wanted to tell him, and I haven't had the chance to see him and tell him what I experienced. One day my wife and I, we were living in Florida, and we was at a restaurant, and I live in Fort Myers, Florida, and I belong to the St. Francis Xavier church here. Well, we're walking out the restaurant, ready to pay my bill, we walk by my pastor and he stopped me and he said, "Hi," he said, "I want to introduce you to my brother, and he'd just arrived from the airport from Ireland, and I brought him here to eat." So he introduced me to his brother, which his brother's name was John. So I said, "Oh, you're from Ireland?" So I start joking with him, that I was a cousin of George Mitchell and stuff like that. And when I said "George Mitchell," he jumped out of that chair [] and he shook my hand, he said, "Ireland loves George Mitchell." So I always wanted to tell George that. That made my day when I heard that. So I hope he reads this, because if I don't see him, at least he can read this and know that happened.

AL: Right, that's nice. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

PM: I can only say, to end this: this scrawny little kid from Front Street will go down in history as one of our greatest statesmen, and I believe in that.

AL: Great, thank you so much.

End of Interview