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Interview with Janet Dennis by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Janet M. Dennis

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Recommended Citation

Dennis, Janet M., "Interview with Janet Dennis by Andrea L'Hommedieu" (2008). *George J. Mitchell Oral History Project*. 150.

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Janet M. Dennis
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

GMOH# 038
September 23, 2008

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College. The date is September 23, 2008, and I'm at the camp of Janet Dennis in Belgrade, Maine, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Janet, could you start just by giving me your full name?

Janet Dennis: Yes, it's Janet Mary Dennis.

AL: And where and when were you born?

JD: I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, September 5, 1945.

AL: And did you grow up in that area?

JD: No, we moved to Maine, to Waterville, when I was four years old, so Maine is home.

AL: And I know we talked a lot when you were interviewed for the Muskie Project about your background and growing up, so we won't repeat that here. But could you tell me your first connection with George Mitchell?

JD: Actually, when I first went to D.C. to work for Senator Muskie, Senator Mitchell was one of the representatives in the office, and I only got to see him like a couple of days, because then he moved back to Maine, into his law practice. But the first time I really got to see him was during one of Muskie's campaigns, when he was running for another Senate term. Senator Muskie had an office in Waterville, and Senator Mitchell and Tom Allen came together to Waterville occasionally, into that office, the campaign office, and that actually was the first time I really got to meet him and to kind of know him.

AL: And did you, you must have had, you had Waterville in common, the Waterville area. Did you make that connection with him? You mentioned your sister had gone to school with him.

JD: Yes, my sister graduated two years behind him, same year as Senator Mitchell's sister Barbara, and as I recollect, Senator Mitchell, or George Mitchell at the time, used to spend lots of time at the North Street Waterville Pool, and I think he may have been a lifeguard. Because when one of my other sisters was there working as a lifeguard, when you got there you could

engrave your name on the building inside, and George Mitchell's name was inside the building. So, but I do know my older sister said he was there all the time, but she couldn't remember whether he was actually a lifeguard, but I am assuming that he was a lifeguard. And I do know that he spent time in the summer working up at Colby [College] as well, mowing lawns and helping his father, who did the janitor work up there.

AL: And so you got to know him in was it the '68 campaign, when [Muskie] was running for vice president?

JD: No, it was '70, when he was, I think it was 1970 when [Muskie] was running again for his Senate.

AL: Okay, and so what roles did you play on that campaign?

JD: I just worked in the office, you know, I just did secretarial type work really. And then after, when I went back to the regular office rather than the campaign office I think they still paid me under the campaign, even though I wasn't doing the campaign work then.

AL: And did you have a chance to observe George Mitchell and his role in that?

JD: Yes, a little bit, because he did come to town frequently, and he had an office there where he spent time. And he certainly was very helpful to Senator Muskie. I'm not a hundred percent sure how involved he was in '68 and '72, '68 when Muskie was running for vice president and then the sad part of 1972 when Muskie was running for the presidency. I'm sure he was very involved in that, but I'm not aware of how much involvement.

AL: Well what did you observe of him over those years, and did you get a sense of George Mitchell and who he was?

JD: My sense, very intellectual, just a real nice person, and very interested in the staff, he would always come and talk to you and talk about your family. But you know, what he was actually doing for the campaign, I wasn't that involved so I can't elaborate on that.

AL: So his relationship with staff, how was that different from Muskie's?

JD: Senator Muskie was equally intelligent as Senator Mitchell, but he never had time to talk and stop and, you know, the staff, he was always focused on what he was doing, and so a hundred percent different.

AL: Now, and did you get to know Senator Mitchell in later years when he became senator?

JD: Well, I didn't spend much time with him, because obviously his time was in D.C. and then of course when he was back in Maine he was in the Portland office, and that's where he did most of his stuff. Occasionally he was in Waterville, but it was usually for a meeting or

something. And most of my position was case work, assisting people with problems that, anything that we could help them with.

AL: Are there any of those issues that come to mind? I know it's many years ago, but were there particular issues that affected the people of Waterville, Maine, that you worked on?

JD: Well I hope so, I think so. The majority of our case work was people with problems with Social Security or the VA, and of course in each of these agencies there was a congressional liaison, so we could immediately pick up the phone, call the congressional liaison office, explain the problem, and obviously we got better attention – when I say we I mean any of the senators and representatives than the poor constituent or person who was trying to resolve the problem themselves. Lots of things, I remember there was a Colby professor who was actually in Europe, and he lost his passport so he couldn't get back to the country. So he called our office in Waterville and so it was something that we worked on with the State Department and the embassy and got him back over.

I'm trying to think of other – there were lots of cases. I know at one time we had to fill out a form and explain some of our cases that we were working on. This is just another example, we had a constituent who was living below poverty level and was trying to recuperate some of the money from the Department of the Army, because he had been in the Army, and so we were able to work on that and get him his money and help him out. I assisted a, I remember assisting a veteran who attended college in Germany, and he was trying to get money under the G.I. Bill, and because he was in Germany they weren't, they were just ignoring him, but we were able to assist him and get him, so that he got assistance for that.

I remember helping somebody from Colby College as well, they had a visiting professor from Brazil and he needed a two-year residency requirement, and so we helped him with the process and was able to get him here sooner than when school was starting. I think one case that I am especially proud of which I worked extra hard on is assisting a constituent whose home of over thirty years had been seized by IRS and put up for auction. Because of my working with IRS, they discouraged anyone who called in, I convinced them to discourage anybody who was calling into saying, oh, I'd like to get this house all paid for and everything. So they held that off for a while, and then what we did next was we assisted the constituent to, where she worked, people made donations, contributions, and she got it, we got a total of four thousand dollars so that took care of that so she was able to keep her house.

AL: Now, and my question is sort of, were there any times there were constituent problems that Senator Mitchell got involved with directly? Did he ever, I mean that's a very minute level from being in Washington, but were there ever things that came up that he got involved in?

JD: To be honest with you, if we had a problem what we would do is, we'd call the D.C. office and talk to maybe the administrative assistant or one of the other staffers, and they in turn maybe talked with Mitchell, Senator Mitchell, and they did assist when there were cases that we just couldn't do anything. But I don't think I can be specific to tell you any of them because we

passed them on sometimes to them, and definitely, you know. He really was such a great guy, and he loved coming back obviously to Waterville, to family. And I was friendly with one of his nieces, Susan Mitchell, and she would talk a lot about him, and whenever they came one of the big things for the family would get together, they played cribbage, it was a big thing for the family.

And years later, after he left the Senate, in Waterville, the post office was named after him. So it's the George Mitchell Waterville Post Office, and he came for that event. And a lot of the staff was there, and I remember him getting up and speaking, and then he wanted to introduce the staff and he had us all stand up and talked about each one of us, and it was really nice of him to do something like that. It was a big event.

AL: Well who were some of the other people you worked with in the Waterville office?

JD: Okay, Beverly Bustin [Hatheway], okay, she was involved in the legislature. When we, after Senator Muskie got through and Senator Mitchell, and I'm assuming you know how he, you know, Joe Brennan picked him. But Joe Brennan didn't want to pick him at first, just because he was in, you know, the judge, he was a federal judge so he didn't think that, but Larry Benoit was the one who convinced Joe Brennan that, yes, we should let Senator Mitchell know, or George Mitchell at the time.

But the office was downtown in Waterville, up above the bank. And one of the things, and I think it was actually Senator Mitchell who made this decision, he wanted the office moved, he wanted it to be part of the federal building, which is the post office building here in Waterville, so he had the office moved to the federal building, the post office. And Bev Bustin, who was the field rep at the time, she also was elected into the legislature, in the House, I think it's the House side, and so she convinced him to also open an office in Augusta, so it was back then that they opened the office in Augusta.

But we dealt with Bev Bustin, Tom Bertocci, and one of the other people that we worked with was Sue Gurney, who unfortunately passed away about three or four years ago. We had a lot of volunteers, and I remember when Ashley Abbott, who was a student – I don't think it was Colby. Maybe it was, it was in the summer time when she was home from college and she became an intern in our office and eventually was hired in D.C. and, you know, did an excellent job. I don't think she, she wasn't administrative assistant, that was Mary McAleney, but under Mary.

AL: Oh really? Is she a Maine person?

JD: Yes.

AL: She's from Maine.

JD: She's from Maine, she actually lived, I think, in the Vassalboro area, because she went to, she didn't go to one of the local Waterville or Winslow schools, I don't remember which.

Her mother is a school teacher. I know her stepfather's a school teacher at Waterville High School. But Ashley was very good, very supportive for all of us.

AL: Do you, have you kept track of her at all, do you know if she's in Maine now or is she in D.C.?

JD: No, she's not, she's in D.C. – I'm not sure, in a surrounding area. She has two children now, so she did, after most of us – or a lot of us, I shouldn't say most of us – were fortunate enough after Senator Mitchell got through, we were able to work for Congressman Baldacci. So, because I had had enough years to retire but I wasn't old enough, and Ashley ran the office in D.C. for Baldacci. She's still there, she's married, her last name is Martinage, I think I have it. And after I [retired], she actually set up a huge party for me when I retired here in Waterville, and I kept in touch with her for a while through the e-mail, but you know, you just get kind of busy and everything.

AL: Are there others that you can think of maybe having been in the Waterville office. Were there any personal friends of the Senator's who would have some contact through you?

JD: Well, we had contact with the family, especially Swisher. And I'm trying to think, one of the Carter boys, I'm not sure if, there was the two Carter boys, they were twins, Herbie and I can't remember the other one's name, but they were very friendly with him, and whenever they would see us, or sometimes would stop by the office.

AL: They were childhood friends?

JD: Yes, through high school. I know I did help one of his brothers, Robbie, who when he was – he was involved in banking – and when he was going to retire, he needed some assistance in getting enough information on, during the war he was involved in one of those, I can't remember the name of it, you know, they hired young people to do work, and he did but he had no record of that and he needed those times, and so with some research we were able to track it down so that he had enough years and everything for his retirement.

AL: And did you interact quite a bit with Larry Benoit in the Portland office?

JD: Yes, yes, Larry, we really did. Actually, Larry was very helpful to me in many, many, many ways, and Clyde, in Bangor, Clyde MacDonald. Larry, I remember, of course I'm in the generation before computers, and one day he showed up at the Waterville office and came in with this computer and he installed it and he says, "Okay, see you later." I says, "Wait a minute, Larry, where are you going? I don't know how to do this; I've never used a computer before." He says, "Oh, it's easy, you'll figure it out." And I did, but yeah, Larry was very good. Larry was the one who spoke to Baldacci to make sure Baldacci hired me to run the Bangor office. Larry obviously was the one who gave George Mitchell the call once he knew that Muskie was leaving, to let him know so that they could let Brennan know, yes, he was interested. Larry had a couple of things at his house in Cape Elizabeth for the entire staff, the Maine staff.

I think the hardest thing for most of us was, when we got the call, it was in the winter, telling us that there was going to be a big get-together in Portland and that Senator Mitchell was flying up. And I remember when I got the call, I says, “Well that’s crazy,” I says, “it’s a snowstorm out there, he’s not going to be able to fly up this morning” and, you know. And they said, “He will be there.” So we had the big get-together and that’s when he told us that he was [not going to run for another term] – none of us had any idea.

AL: *(Unintelligible)*.

JD: Yes, Larry I’m sure knew, Larry was very [close with Mitchell].

AL: That he wouldn’t be running for reelection.

JD: Yeah, yeah. But I was, you know, so proud of him when he decided to take, he offered to return the campaign money, but when he set whatever was left up into that scholarship fund for Maine students, high school students, that was really impressive.

AL: And so some of the staff was able to move over to Baldacci?

JD: Yes, yes, quite a bit of us. Judy Cadorette, I don’t know if you’ve met with Judy.

AL: Yes, she helped me find you.

JD: Oh, is that right. I’m trying to, obviously Larry, myself, Ashley; I mean a lot of us were able to. I think Clyde probably could have stayed, but he wasn’t interested, he wanted to move on to something else.

AL: And he must have been close to retirement age?

JD: At that time he could have retired, yeah, but actually he retired, was it last summer – to be honest with you, I can’t remember because I think he had a couple of other jobs. But they had, I’m sure you’ve heard, they had a big event for him, and Senator Mitchell was there and, you know, it was the first time I’d seen him in a while.

AL: How was that event, it must have been -?

JD: It was very good, a lot of people that we hadn’t, I hadn’t seen in years came, and it was amazing. His, one of his staffers in the office, Margaret Samways, she’s the one that set it up and everything, and it was really nice. And Senator Mitchell stayed for the whole thing, he didn’t just walk in and speak and leave, and they invited all Senator Mitchell’s family there, and Swisher and Prin were the only two that came up, the others just had too much other things going on but, so they were there too, as well.

AL: So Margaret Samways, she's somebody maybe I should talk to?

JD: Yes, very good, right now she works, she's still working for the government, she works in Bangor for the Justice Department, I think it's the Justice Department. And I do, I have, I can give you her address, phone number, I've got actually her work phone number and her home number.

AL: Oh, that would be great, yeah. Are there things that I haven't asked you about that you feel are important to add, in terms of any experiences or perspective?

JD: Well, I don't know if this is something. Senator Mitchell was the student, he wasn't the sports person. But I know he did play baseball, but he loved baseball, and of course he loved the Red Sox. And the only thing is, I think he got some, a little bit involved when they were thinking of building a new stadium in Boston, and I know there were a lot of people around here that were hoping that wouldn't happen, and they were a little disappointed that he was in favor of it, you know.

AL: Did you ever drive the Senator when he was in Maine?

JD: Yes, I did. Not a lot. I had to drive him to Augusta one time, and I, when we got to Augusta we had to actually pick up Senator Cohen, and it was in the winter time so I used my husband's Toyota 4-Runner, and I was only taking them to the Augusta airport where they flying out. And we picked up Senator Cohen at one of the hotels in Augusta, and he did not want to get in the car, because it was not an American car. And I tried to explain to him that, you know, the weather and everything, and he really didn't, and Senator Mitchell said, no, come on, get in the car, [p/o] we're just going to the airport.

I know one time my, actually it was really, really bad [the weather]. And I can't remember what happened, he was in town, he had to get to Portland, with a stop in Augusta, and they didn't think he was going to make it; they were shutting down the roads and everything. But my husband, they asked if I would do it and I said, "No, but I'll get my husband to do it." So he drove them, and he spent an hour or so in Augusta and then drove them on down to Portland, I don't know whether it was to the office or to his home in Portland. But yeah, other than that, he had a very close friend here in Waterville who used to work for the telephone company, Charles; I can't remember his last name.

AL: Lander?

JD: Yes, Charlie Lander, yeah, Charlie Lander used to drive him everywhere and became his best friend, they did a lot together. And he must have known him from Waterville.

AL: Well I know that Charlie Lander was close with Senator Muskie, so it perhaps was a carry-over.

JD: Yeah, that could very well be it.

AL: I didn't realize Charlie was from Waterville.

JD: Yes, well I don't know, he lived here, because I know my sisters, my older sisters, babysat his kids.

AL: It's a small world.

JD: Yes, definitely, very small world. But I have such great respect for Senator Mitchell. He comes to Waterville, to Colby, I don't know if it's once a year but quite frequently, and whenever he's going to be up there speaking Margaret Lemoine and I always go up to listen to him. And I'm just amazed at how intelligent he is and how sharp he is, and so involved in so many things and so active. And yeah, I just, I was really disappointed that he did not win the Nobel Peace Prize, I think he deserved that, I really do, for what he's done.

AL: And Margaret Lemoine, is she just a friend of yours or was she politically active too?

JD: She became active when David, her son, you know, worked for Senator Muskie and Mitchell; I think he worked for Muskie for a short while, maybe an internship. And actually when – she was a librarian at Waterville High School, and when she retired she just had to keep busy, so she volunteered and came in to the Waterville office on two or three days a week, yeah, and she became very involved and a staunch Democrat, and had great respect for Senator Mitchell as well.

AL: Well great, thank you so much.

JD: You're welcome.

End of Interview