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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Joanne A. Hoffmann
(Interviewer: *Brien Williams*)

GMOH# 059
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Brien Williams: This is an oral history interview with Joanne Amcott Hoffman for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College in Maine. We are in Joanne's home in Potomac, Maryland, today is Tuesday, January 13, 2009, and I'm Brien Williams. Let me ask you first, Joanne, to give your full name and spelling, and the date and place of your birth.

Joanne Hoffmann: Okay, my full name is Joanne, J-O-A-N-N-E, Hoffmann, H-O-F-F-M-A-N-N, date of birth is April 23, 1936, in Lewiston, Maine.

BW: And your parents' names?

JH: My parents' names were Germaine and Roland Amcott, A-M-N-O-T-T.

BW: Great. I have reviewed the interview you gave Don Nicoll in the Muskie Collection at Bates College, so there's a lot of material that we won't be needing to cover today because you've already talked about it.

JH: That's good.

BW: But I did want to start out by asking you a little bit about what it was like coming to Washington in 1959, what was the mood of the town and how did it impress you, and was this your first visit?

JH: This was my second visit. When I graduated from high school, we had a high school trip to Washington, and of course, you know, just being a high school kid, it was all very exciting but a big blur, because you do so much. So, it really was my second time in Washington but the first time as an employee.

And it was just very exciting, coming from Lewiston, [Maine], to come to big city Washington with a United States senator. So that part was very exciting. Washington seemed very big and scary. We used to get lost all the time coming and going home, and I remember one time being asked by the senator where this particular place was and I said, "Well, I don't really know but you can see the Washington Monument from -" He said, "Well that's no help because in Washington you can see the Washington Monument from everywhere." So [we] ran into little things like that.

And I remember the very first celebrity I met was Harry Truman [at] a reception [I went to] with the senator []. But getting settled was a challenge because, being a freshman senator nobody paid much attention to freshman senators; they kind of put you in a little space and you kind of did your own thing for a while, and then you had to learn your way around by yourself. So, as I say, it was all very exciting.

BW: Where did you live, and how did you get your living quarters?

JH: Well, my parents knew someone here and I lived with them for a while. And then I took an apartment on Massachusetts Avenue, which was not far from where the senator and Jane lived, and so I was able to commute back and forth to work with him. []

BW: What do you think was the key for your getting this lucky position and coming down to Washington with the senator?

JH: My previous boss, I think, gave me a great recommendation. And, you know, I was interviewed a couple of times and asked back, and I think he took a chance and I was more than happy to take the chance, so it was wonderful. I mean, I was with him for almost eight years, and then stayed very, very close to the family through all the years to come. In fact, I was with Ed when he died and Jane was with me when my husband died; they died a week apart in the same hospital, one on the third floor and one on the fourth floor. So we've all been very, very close, and I've been close to the children [] through the years and Jane [and I were] best friends. So it was a lifetime experience, really.

BW: Describe, I was so struck when you said that it was just you and the senator when you first came down. How did the staff grow, and over what time did it?

JH: Well, Bob Huse came down as the legislative assistant. He was with Ed in the governor's office. []. And then John, John was a professor -

BW: His last name?

JH: Donovan, John Donovan, and he came about the same time too, you know, so it was five months, six months before everybody kind of got on board. And then the other Maine girl we took on as a receptionist, she was already here in Washington, was Gayle Fitzgerald [Cory]. She worked with the telephone company, and came in for an interview, and she was from Bath, Maine, and so we took her on as a receptionist. She was there for a lot longer than I was, because she stayed after I left. [] In fact, she went to the State Department with him when he was secretary of state. So slowly, you know, we tried to take people from Maine, and most of the staff was from Maine. Little by little, you know, we acquired staff. It takes a while.

BW: But it sounds like the staff may be, even at the point where you left the senator's service, was only about ten, twelve people, would that be right?

JH: Probably twelve, but then there's also a lot of committee staff which are not part of the inner staff []. But just the basic office, probably twelve or so. It's amazing how much it grows as you gain seniority, you get a lot more staff and a lot more committees and a lot more work.

BW: Tell me, do you have any observations on the mood in the office and whatnot when John Kennedy was elected and became president?

JH: Well, I think everybody was excited. I know that Ed was very happy. I think [there were] great expectations, like there is now. I think the whole country had that feeling, and I think it was permeated throughout the Capitol building as well. I think there's great excitement now, I don't think I've seen any of that since John Kennedy. Unfortunately, he didn't have much time to prove himself either. I [think] that Barack Obama [brings hope for change]; I think he's coming at the right time, this country needs a big change and I think it's wonderful. And I think John Kennedy inspired that same feeling that we're experiencing now, great hope, so everybody was pretty excited.

BW: And what was it like on November 22nd [1963, the day of Kennedy's assassination]?

JH: Oh, terrible, terrible, terrible.

BW: How did the senator handle that?

JH: Well, he was a very quiet man and kept his emotions to himself. Very quiet. I mean, you had to really know him to know what he was feeling. No outward [signs], just very sad, very, very sad, for everyone and for our country []. (*Unintelligible*).

BW: Your job title was personal secretary?

JH: Yes.

BW: Just describe what your role was, what your duties were.

JH: Oh my goodness, everything, everything, everything. Well, at the beginning, I was office manager for quite a while, as well as personal secretary. But personal secretary involves everything, you know, I used to stay with the children when they went out of town, I did all their personal bookkeeping, all of the [Senator's] scheduling. Well there was no one, you know, for a long time – we didn't have anybody else to assign anything to, so I did a lot. All of the scheduling and, you know, it also involves all the very personal stuff that goes into their social [activities].

BW: Do you think that holds true today, that there's a blend of personal service and Senate related service from the staff?

JH: Oh yes, I think if you're a personal secretary you get involved in everything that goes on.

You don't do any of the legislative stuff, but you do [have to keep abreast of everything].

BW: Did you consider yourself sort of a gatekeeper, too, for him?

JH: Oh yes. I mean, I think you have to make friends with the personal secretary or else you don't get in to see the boss, you know. You do, you have to protect them because everybody and his brother wants their time. So I think that it behooves people to make friends with the AA and the personal secretary, because nothing [gets] by them unless they [truly feel] the boss would want it. So [everyone is] very protective, [] because there's so many demands on him.

BW: And as your office grew, what kind of a relationship did you establish with the AA's?

JH: Well, very good, because you worked very closely [together as] you are keeping the senator's schedule and so they have to work [] with you. I don't know what kind of staffs they have now because they are so big and there's so much [new] technology, but the personal secretary and the AA and the LA worked pretty closely together.

BW: You described your job in the Bates interview as dictation, dictation, dictation.

JH: Lots, yes. Ed liked to dictate. [He didn't like to record, so] most of the time it was shorthand. He liked to do it like that.

BW: And in addition to correspondence, what was he dictating?

JH: Oh, his thoughts on different bills, stuff like that. A lot of personal mail that he would answer, constituent mail that he felt needed a personal answer, stuff like that.

BW: How did speech writing -

JH: Speeches, speeches.

BW: Would he just speak and you'd write, dictate, and that would become a speech.

JH: Yes, and then he'd edit it and then, you know, back and forth, back and forth. This was up to the very last minute that he would give a speech, so we might be changing it five minutes before he [spoke]. He liked to dictate one-on-one.

BW: What was your first awareness of George Mitchell, when did you first become aware of him?

JH: I really don't remember. I mean, I just remember George as having a beautiful smile, always being an 'up' person; nothing seemed to fluster him, [] it's like everything would be okay, no matter what the problem was. He was very good with people, very, very good. Didn't have a temper. If he did, I never saw it. I just admired his grace with people. He was good

working with staff and always very nice and respectful, and didn't throw his weight around or, that kind of personality. He just, he was just a nice person.

BW: Now before we started you said that he was the third AA in succession.

JH: I think so, I think he came after Don Nicoll.

BW: Describe the personalities of those first three; what were each one of them like and how different?

JH: Well, they were very different. George was different from both of them. John and Don were more, well as I say, they were college professors. I don't know what Don's work was before. John was funny. They were different from George. George was looser, or not so uptight, and he was just good with people, more easy going. And you were never afraid of George, where you might be afraid of Don or John.

BW: And what were their, all three, their interfaces with the senator like? How did they work with the senator?

JH: Oh, they all worked very well with him. I think all of them had a very good relationship with him. I mean there were difficult times, but they had great respect for him and I think they all worked very well with him.

BW: What would an example of difficult times have been?

JH: Well, you know, there's lots of [legislation and they] would banter back and forth on different things and they'd have their own ideas and he had his, and so there's a lot of give and take in a situation like that. Ed had a temper, and he was very strong about making his points [clear] and they were, too, so you got a lot of that, but that was good, you know, [because] you didn't have a bunch of yes-men around. Ed liked that, even though he disagreed sometimes but he did like [the give and take and]. He didn't want yes-men around him. So they all did their work very well.

BW: And that was the modus operandi in the office; that there was a lot of discussion and it was a sort of collegial situation?

JH: Yes.

BW: I got the, little bit of the impression from your other interview that maybe Mitchell's personality was kind of a welcomed step forward, because it was maybe a buffer between the staff and the senator's temper?

JH: Hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm, yes. Well, George was more easy going, and as I say, I never saw him really angry so I would gather it took a lot to ignite [him]. So George was easy; he

would just take things in stride and not get ruffled, so [he] was kind of a nice leveler.

BW: How did you handle the anger?

JH: Oh, maybe I got a little bit of it but not that much. We had a really good working relationship, we really did. He pretty much let me, you know, run the show, and I was not afraid of him. We had a lot of respect for each other and we worked well together. I didn't have a problem. I didn't like his temper, but it didn't bother me [].

BW: I haven't asked anyone this question really yet: where was his temper typically directed? At individuals, or at issues, situations, where? What made him mad?

JH: Not at individuals particularly. I think [with] issues, and if he got too scheduled or got very frustrated with a bill that wasn't going through, or his frustration with Lyndon Johnson, you know, he didn't like all that arm twisting and all that stuff. It was more frustration and not being able to push stuff as quickly as he wanted and to get things done as quickly as he wanted. Having to wait around in committees for bills to come through or not come through. I don't know how it all worked in the governor's office, but I have a feeling that things moved quicker in a governor's office than they do in the United States Senate, so that was extremely frustrating for him, and I think a lot of his anger came out of frustration, and not directed at a particular person. But if you happened to be standing there, you're the person that got it.

BW: And was there a lot of turnover in the office?

JH: No, no, we had a pretty good staff. We had great interns, and in fact not too long ago my doorbell rang and it was this young, my age, I want to say young, he's my age now, but he was a Capitol Hill police officer on our patronage. In fact, I used to type up all of his legal papers. And he lives in Florida. He came from Maine and was a college student at George Washington University, and so Ed had put him on as a police officer during his internship here. So I hadn't heard from him in years and years, and he had come to Washington and he was at Congressional Country Club, so he knew I lived here, so he rang the bell. I opened the door, I was shocked. But, so it was nice to see him and reminisce, you know, way back then.

BW: What were some of the things that you talked about?

JH: Well his days being a Capitol police officer, you know, and he just loved being up there, and he was there during all the exciting times too, you know, and made great friends, and became a lawyer. And his wife worked for Ed in the banking subcommittee for quite a number of years, Ann Mooers, her name was, and [a] lovely girl. We became good friends. They had a courtship on the Hill and married, and live in Florida now.

BW: Now, you were also observing George Mitchell's courtship during that time you were in the office, describe that a little bit, how did that all -?

JH: Well, she also worked, I think she worked for Government Relations Committee or something, I can't remember. But she was on one of the committees and that's how George and Sally met, I think. She did a lot of work for us. She was in and out of Ed's office a lot because he was chairman of that committee – this is a long while back now, I don't quite remember. But anyway, they had a great courtship, and I loved Sally, she was a very nice gal. She and George made a great couple. And before they were married we had a dinner here for them, and unfortunately the marriage didn't last, but they were a great couple.

BW: Do you have any inkling why the marriage didn't last?

JH: No, I have no idea, no.

BW: Can you think of any highlights of George's time in Muskie's office? Any major accomplishments or -?

JH: See, I wasn't there long enough. All I, my impression was he came at the right time, he was a great leveler; everybody on the staff, as far as I know, loved George. And so, I was happy. I thought that he was very good for the senator and, but [I] didn't really get a chance to work much with him.

BW: When you say good for the senator, in what way?

JH: Well, he's very smart. I thought that he could help Ed a lot. He, and as I say, he was calm; a [very] calm person and I think that was good. And Leon Billings worked with George a lot, so I don't know if his impressions are the same but I think that Ed worked well with George and it was a good fit.

BW: Now in '65, George Mitchell decided to go back to Maine to practice law, as I understand it. Do you have any inkling of why he decided, made that decision at that particular point after only a couple years in the senator's office?

JH: No, I, well I think that his wife wanted to go back to Maine, as I recall. And she didn't really like politics very much, so I think that probably played a big factor in it.

BW: She was also from Maine.

JH: Yes, and I think Sally always wanted to go back to Maine. So I think that played a factor in it, but how much I don't know. You know, maybe George, this is really what George wanted to do, I don't know. But I think that played a factor in it. And we both left in '65, so we didn't really see much of each other after that.

BW: Until, not much, your life paths -?

JH: No, they didn't cross very much until we had all these funerals. [] Gayle was the

receptionist in our office, and then Charlie, his name was Charlie Lander and he worked for Ed. He worked for the telephone company and was an executive with the telephone company in Maine, but he handled all of the communication stuff when Ed was on the road and traveled [with him] during the campaigns. So he was the first one to die, and then Ed died, my husband died, and Gayle died, so there were like five [funerals] in like six months, and George did like three or four [of the] eulogies and so I got to see George a lot during that time, that sad time for all of us, but I hadn't seen him in a long time.

BW: When he left to go back to Maine, did he still continue to come down to Washington and drop in from time to time, or did he pretty much disappear from the Muskie scene?

JH: No, I think he kept in touch with Ed but I don't know how frequently or how much, because I think Ed helped him a lot in his decision to become a United States senator himself. If it hadn't been for Ed, he probably would not have pursued that. So I guess they were [] in touch a lot [].

BW: Now, you became involved in the Muskie vice presidential campaign in '68, and George Mitchell was also playing a role in that campaign. Did your paths cross?

JH: Well I'm sure they did.

BW: Nothing memorable.

JH: I don't remember too much. My husband was head of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee at that time, so he was involved in a lot of that and he traveled with Ed quite a bit. And then when we went to Chicago I did a lot of work for Ed. He used to dictate all his speeches and all of that, and I thought, you know, 'I thought I quit this job.' But, it was an exciting time so I was happy to be there and do that, but you know, other than just being with Ed and Jane, I didn't have much contact with the rest of the staff.

BW: What were your lasting impressions of being in Chicago in 1968?

JH: Oh, it was awful. It was so, so terrible. That's why it was so moving to see Grant Park this time around, as my last impression of Grant Park was not a very good one. Of course Ed had the Secret Service detail [] at that time. It was just such an unbelievable experience to walk into the hotels and have all of these stink bombs being thrown at you. And of course we used to have to go underground to come out of the hotels and [then] they'd throw all kinds of stuff at you. To look out the windows and see all that fighting, you felt like you were in a world war somewhere; it just wasn't the United States, you know? But then to see this with Obama and the people out there [with] no disruption and no fighting, it was just refreshing and so moving. Such an opposite dichotomy. Amazing, amazing!

BW: Were you in Chicago this time around, or just watching it on television?

JH: No, just watching it.

BW: And then what about the '72 campaign, did you and/or your husband, were you involved?

JH: Well, he was involved a lot but I wasn't, no.

BW: For the record, what did prompt you to leave Muskie's office in '65?

JH: I got married and I didn't want to work [anymore]. And Nordy was traveling a lot and I wanted to be able to travel with him. But it was a long while, Ed wasn't very accepting of my leaving, and so I did a lot of the bookkeeping and personal family stuff for a while after I was married but then finally, you know, he came to realize I wasn't coming back. But the [one] reason I left was [that] my husband was in politics so I never really left it, you know. He was director of the campaign committee, and then he became sergeant-at-arms, so I was involved all the time anyway, but did not want a nine-to-five job.

BW: What was it like when you walked into the senator's office and said, "I've decided to leave," what kind of an encounter was that?

JH: Well I kept telling him I was leaving. Well, he and my husband were very close friends, and I met him through Ed and Jane and they were kind of the instigators for this union. And so they were happy with that, but he was [not accepting of the whole idea]. I said over and over again I was leaving, I was leaving, but I don't think he really thought that I would, you know, but I did.

BW: Who replaced you?

JH: Gayle [then] became [his secretary]. She just kind of stepped in []. Then when Ed became secretary of state he asked me to come back. I had a young daughter then. It was very exciting and I was very flattered that he asked me to come back and I did think about it a lot, but you know, I could not give him the time that I gave when I was single. And being secretary of state was [huge], you know, and he'd be on an airplane all the time. And my husband was much older than I was, and we had a young daughter. As much as I wanted to do it, it was very hard for me to say no but I [did]. And I felt bad not to do it, because I thought it was a very exciting time – even though it was short, you know, I guess he was secretary of state, what, six, seven months. It would have been a very exciting experience. And it was so nice that he did want me to come back, but I said, "I can't do it." I've always felt bad, but I did the [the right thing for my family]. I was happy with my decision [].

BW: How many children did you -?

JH: I just have one daughter.

BW: And has she, is politics part of her life?

JH: Well, she majored in government and communications, and then she went to Notre Dame, graduated from Notre Dame, and worked on the Hill in the press office for four years before she got married. So she was a political animal, you know.

BW: I'm just checking my notes here. What are your observations -? Let me just collect my thoughts. Looking back on George Mitchell as you saw him as a senator, how would you describe him, and how was he different than Ed Muskie as a senator, would you say?

JH: Well, I don't know. I think both extremely dedicated and hard working. So they were the same in lots of ways, just one calmer than the other. Ed was, I think, an introvert, where George is more of a people person. But I think as far as being dedicated to their work and to the state of Maine, I would think they're both on the same level.

BW: Someone, in talking about George Mitchell's unsuccessful run for governor in, I think it was 1974, said that he was, his people skills were deficient, and that's one of the reasons he lost. And that he then sort of read Dale Carnegie or something, I don't know, that was never said to me, but anyway, and somehow worked on himself to become more a people person.

JH: See, in what was it, '63, '64, when he first surfaced, I thought he had people skills, you know, I just thought he did. So -

BW: So the man you knew at that point didn't change greatly when he became a senator.

JH: No, I don't think so. Maybe experience does a lot for a person as you go along, but I thought from the beginning he had people skills, I really did.

BW: You describe Muskie as a perfectionist. What would be the adjectives that come to mind when you describe George Mitchell, and you've obviously mentioned several of them of course in this interview.

JH: Well you know, not having worked in depth with him like I did with the senator, I really can't say.

BW: And what about Mitchell as the keeper of Muskie's legacy, particularly in environmental areas, do you think he carried that on?

JH: Yes, I think he really wanted to, I think he was very dedicated to Ed and very appreciative of all of the help and the experience and the education that he gained from the senator. So, I think he tried to really emulate or carry on some of the things that Ed worked so hard on, yes.

BW: How do you think Mitchell will be remembered? Or how ought he to be remembered?

JH: I don't know. I don't know if he's made enough of a mark yet, you know. I mean he was majority leader of the Senate but not that long so – the Peace Accords, I think maybe that. I think he worked very hard on that. But you know, fame is fleeting, and in politics especially, so unless you've really, really done something really great, you're soon forgotten. Fame is very fleeting on the Hill.

BW: One thing that I have not heard much talked about is political wives, and describe a little bit where Jane played into the Senate life and just talk about that for a moment.

JH: Well, she was very much involved in his Senate life, but she had a lot of children so, you know, wives take a back seat a lot in politics. The wife of, you know, is an appendage. Unless you have an agenda yourself, you pretty much take a back seat and take the role that your husband allows you to play. She was a great campaigner I think, and she did whatever Ed really [asked of her] – and did it well, she had a very nice personality, but it's hard being a political wife because you're not out there, you're a shadow behind. So it's very hard. You're left alone a lot, and if you have a lot of children, you can't just pick up and take off every time. And it's not expedient for them too, a lot of stuff is committee work and committee junkets and, where wives are not [asked to go]. [] And so you're left alone a lot, and if you choose not to come to Washington, then you're really alone a lot. So it's hard; it's a very hard role. I think it's [difficult] for the children, [] because if both parents take extremely active roles then the kids are left behind, and it's very hard. So [] the parents [have to be in sync].

BW: Would you say that the senator was dependent on his wife in certain ways?

JH: Yes, oh yes.

BW: In what ways?

JH: Well, he relied a lot on her and wanted her there during campaigns and all of that. They were very much a team.

BW: How large a family did they have?

JH: They had, let's see, [five children] [Steve], Ned, Ellen, Melinda, Martha – five, they had five.

BW: And when they were living here in Washington, did they have a house?

JH: Yes, yes.

BW: On Massachusetts Avenue?

JH: Off of Massachusetts Avenue, in [Bethesda]. They had, as a matter of fact, two [houses

over the years,] and then when Ed was secretary of state they lived in a town home not far from where they originally lived, in Westbard Circle, so they always lived in the same neighborhood, off of Massachusetts Avenue.

BW: And after he retired they stayed in Washington, is that correct?

JH: Yes, but they had their home in Kennebunkport so they'd spend the summer in Kennebunkport and then, because Ed was with a law firm which had an office here and in New York, but he spent most of his time here.

BW: And so then you saw them socially through the years.

JH: All the time.

BW: But the Mitchells weren't involved in those social occasions typically.

JH: No, no.

BW: Did the Muskies ever share any thoughts with you and your husband about George Mitchell that you recall?

JH: No, I don't think we ever really talked about George, no.

BW: One of the things that intrigued me about your Bates interview was that you said this: "I think I would have become a lawyer if I'd stayed in Lewiston." Was that a mistake?

JH: No, no. No, because, you know, you can't say it was a mistake, I mean I enjoyed my [years in Washington] and had so much exposure and so many great things that happened while I worked with Ed, and I wouldn't have met my husband and, you know, a lot of great things happened with him. So no, it wasn't a mistake, but had I not [come to Washington] I probably would have become a lawyer, because I worked for several lawyers in Lewiston and I just loved the law. In fact, I worked for Bill Hathaway, who was a congressman. I worked with him just a few months, and then when Ed and I were campaigning he would let me use his office in Auburn when we used to go to Maine in the summertime to campaign. That's when Congress used to let out early and we'd have three months off to campaign. I was intrigued by the law, and I had a wonderful, wonderful boss who, when he was dictating to me and if I would say, "Well what does that mean?" and he'd say, "Well let's look it up," and we'd go into the library and he'd let me look it up and explain it to me. So I learned an awful lot from him, and I think that's how I got my interest in law. So if I had stayed there, that's probably what I would have done.

BW: Do you still have connections with Maine?

JH: No, unfortunately when Jane died – because I used to go up every summer and spend some time in Kennebunkport with her – that was my last contact. I used to have a brother who

lived in Maine but he moved to Florida, and my parents are deceased, so I really have no connection to Maine now, none whatsoever.

BW: I get the impression that being a person from Maine signifies, and that Maine never quite leaves your DNA, is that -?

JH: No, although I've lived here longer than I ever lived in Maine, because I left in '59 and I've never really gone back to live there.

BW: Would either Ed Muskie or George Mitchell have, could you see them as being a senator from another part of the country, or is there something inbred in them about being from Maine?

JH: I don't know about George, but I think that Ed was Maine, yes, he was Maine.

BW: And what does that mean?

JH: Well, I think it was very much a part of his roots. He loved Maine, and he, of course, was a lawyer before he became governor. His roots were really in Maine. His father was from Rumford and so he'd always lived in Maine and I think he loved the state; he really did, he loved to go back there. When we were first here when I first worked for him, he had a summer place in South China, which is called China Lake, South China Lake, and he used to love that place and he used to go back there every summer. Then they sold that and bought in Kennebunkport. No, his roots were really deep in Maine. I can't picture him being from anywhere else.

BW: And there's a real connection between the interest in environmental issues.

JH: Right. I mean people thought, you know, "What is all this about, this Clean Air?" He fought so hard for that, so [very] hard for that, and he worked very hard, took a lot of knocks on that because people, you know, just weren't in tune with any of that stuff back then. But he persevered and finally succeeded in his quest. So he had vision, you know; he had great vision.

BW: Are we leaving anything unsaid that -?

JH: I don't think so. I feel bad that I can't tell you more about George but we just didn't work together that long, you know. But I think he was great, the short time we were together.

BW: Good, well thank you very much for your time.

JH: Well you're very welcome.

End of Interview