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Interview with Shep Lee by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Shepard 'Shep' Lee

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Shepard “Shep” Lee
(Interviewer: *Andrea L’Hommedieu*)

GMOH# 003
March 20, 2008

Andrea L’Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College. The date is March 20, 2008. I am at the office of Shep Lee at Lee Auto Malls in Westbrook, Maine. This is Andrea L’Hommedieu. And Shep, could you start just by giving me your full name?

Shep Lee: Shepard Lee, that’s it.

AL: And where and when were you born?

SL: I was born in 1926, November, in Lewiston, Maine.

AL: Yes, and I know we did a lot of background, talking about your background, for the Muskie Project so we won’t repeat that here, just let researchers know they can go to those interviews for that information. But I’d like to talk about Senator Mitchell, when you first met him, what was your contact with him?

SL: I’m trying hard to remember just what brought us together. It goes way, way back into the ‘60s. I’m sure it had to do through Ed Muskie, had to be through Ed Muskie. Muskie was a very good friend of mine, and would stay with me when he came to southern or central Maine. I lived in Auburn then. And I can remember once – I thought this was funny – Muskie was very much of a well known character by then, and I had a house in Auburn, looking out at the lake, it was a very nice view, in the right season. And so Muskie got up one morning, he’s looking out the window at the lake. He loved nature. And he turns to me and he says, “Boy, do I envy you.” And I thought that was comical, you know, here’s this nationally known whatever-it-might-be, talking about running for president and what he was envying was the view of the lake.

But anyway, I remember selling George a car in probably 1963. I had probably met him a couple years before then, as I say, and I’m sure it was through Senator Muskie. Was he working for Muskie in the early ‘60s?

AL: Hm-hmm.

SL: Well, then that’s where I met him, I knew all the people in Muskie’s office. I would visit him often, he would visit me often, so I’m sure that’s what got me acquainted with George.

AL: And so how did you, you formed a friendship at some point.

SL: We did, well we did almost from the beginning. As I say, I sold him a car. He said to me, “If you work in Muskie’s office, you feel you have to buy a car from you,” he says. I used to lend Muskie a car to use when he was in Maine, so there was a loyalty there. Then we started playing tennis together, and every Monday night Harold Pachios, George, Judge Scolnik, Louis Scolnik, who was a life-long friend of mine, and I – Louis and I would ride down to, oh, where’s the town’s court in Portland, off toward Lewiston there – we’d come down and we’d play doubles. We did this for years, on Monday nights, so we got to know each other well. Then we’d have dinner or supper at the tennis court. Either there or right near there, I can’t remember where the restaurant was.

So we got to know each other very well, and we became friends. We had a lot in common. Mine was political interest, but he went to Bowdoin – he’s younger than I am, but I went to Bowdoin – so we had a lot of background and politic interests in common, and so we got to be good friends. And we would see each other often, and I got to know Sally very well, his first wife, and I got to know Heather very well, as well.

So I went through that whole period with him. I remember being in Washington in his office when he told me he was getting divorced, and that was sad. And I was getting divorced. Do you remember when he got divorced?

AL: 1987? Does that sound right? I think that’s close.

SL: Really?

AL: Because I believe Bill Cohen was going through a divorce at the same time.

SL: And so was I. That was a year, ‘the year of divorces’ I guess. So anyway, we shared a lot of experiences, and had a lot of interests in common and we liked each other.

AL: So what have you, over the years, how has your political interest intersected with Senator Mitchell’s career?

SL: Well, I’ve always been very interested in whatever, whatever career, for many years political career, he was pursuing, and would do what I could to be helpful, whether it was money or cars or just friendship.

I remember my first wife, Nancy her name was, she and I went, we were practically on the honeymoon together. That had to be the second wife. No, maybe the first. We had gone to the same place where they had gone, and it had to be the first marriage. When was he married?

AL: I’m not sure.

SL: I think it was – anyway, we spent a lot of time together, we got to know him well, we did

a lot of things together, and the friendship blossomed. And I had, and still have, the highest regard, as I said before, I think he's got to be the most talented and distinguished person to come out of Maine, at least during the last half of the twentieth century. And I have a very high regard for Muskie and he was a very close friend, but in a way, George outdid, with his talents, what Muskie did. Muskie was a great politician, and respected and decent, learned and all of that. But he didn't have the breadth of talents that George has. And neither did Margaret Chase Smith. So I think, in a way, of people I know about, he's got to be the most talented person Maine has produced in at least the last half century, maybe more than that.

AL: From knowing him over all the years, what have you observed about him that makes him so successful?

SL: Well first, he's very smart. He's also a good listener, in spite of the fact that he's talking to Muskie in the picture you were talking about. He's a good listener, and just a loyal guy. I think this is probably one of the things that make him so special in my book. I mean, he grew in stature, you know, became internationally known with the Irish bit and all that stuff. But through it all, he maintained his old friendships and he never let them, he never let his head get too big, and he never forgot his old, loyal friends. That's unusual, you know. Most people who rise – I suspect this is true – most people who rise to the levels that he did, I think in a way probably leave some of the old friendships behind, they no longer fit. He never did that. He always respected and regarded old friends as important.

AL: What are your recollections of the 1974 gubernatorial campaign?

SL: Oh -

AL: That was a tough race.

SL: It's sad, it's sad. That the one with Jimmy Longley?

AL: Yes.

SL: I grew up with Jimmy Longley, I went to Bowdoin the same time he did, so I knew him well. He was as phony as a three dollar bill. Big baby blue eyes, nice smile, and if you spent any time with him you could very well leave thinking he was your best friend, but he wasn't. And so I was so bitter, really, about how Maine people could do that, because the caliber of these two people is just so different that, that was a very disappointing time. Well, and I'm sure more for George than for anybody else, but there was something – oh, we were blaming Ken Curtis, who is also a very good and old friend. He had appointed what's-his-name, the opponent? Who was George's opponent in that election? We just mentioned it, I forgot his name.

AL: Jim Longley.

SL: Longley. He had appointed Longley to be head of a Maine cost survey commission [i.e.,

Maine Management and Cost Survey Commission], that isn't the right name but it conveys the idea, and Longley rode that to popularity by, well by milking it for all it was worth. And so after the election we were telling Ken Curtis, "See what you did, for God's sake, you made this guy popular and now he beat George in the election." But I give Longley credit for his political skills, and that's really, that gave him the opportunity to make himself well known and to win.

AL: And then of course he took over the end of Ed Muskie's term as senator, George did, and that next election cycle, were you active in his reelection?

SL: Yes, yes.

AL: In what way?

SL: I've been involved in one way or another in I think just about every campaign he's had. Not in a central, important way, but in a way that was helpful. I'm sure I provided automobiles, because if you were a Democrat and you ran for office, nationally – and this is one of the things I enjoyed – I'd get a call from Hubert Humphrey's assistant saying, "Senator Humphrey's coming to Maine and he needs a car, and they tell me you're generous with Democrats." So I would meet, and what I would do in some cases, if I hadn't met the person, is I'd say "Yeah, I'll be glad to do that, but I want to drive one of the cars. I want to drive the candidate," if that was allowable. Usually it wasn't, because it was Secret Service people, so they would drive. But I would go in the car right behind them.

I can remember when Johnson was in one of my cars and he wanted to stop for an ice cream in Brunswick, in Topsham. Did you ever see the – for years they had that sign up there. I was with him when he stopped, and the guy in front of me, who must have been in the car that Johnson was, he says, "He wants a -" – what was he then, vice president? Or president, I can't remember.

AL: I thought he was president, but it depends on the -

SL: No, I think he was president, he was president.

AL: Yeah, and it was the Dairy Queen, right?

SL: At the Dairy Queen. Because the guy in his reached out, he said, "The president wants an ice cream cone." And so this whole line of traffic stopped, and several of us got ice cream cones. But it was exciting, and for me it was a way to get to meet the politicians. I loaned Nixon a car when he came to Maine. And anyway, so it was a fun thing to do and helped, for me, by the fact I was in the car business and could lend them automobiles.

AL: Now, Shep, I don't think we've asked you this before, but where does your political interest come?

SL: Where does it come?

AL: From where does it come?

SL: Oh, I'm not sure I have an answer for that. From college on, I had an interest in the political process. I remember in college I organized a weekly questionnaire thing that we sent to all the fraternity houses, and people would fill them out and we would tabulate the results on political questions and send it to the Maine delegation. And that was kind of the beginning of my interest in the political process. Where it came from, I don't know. I just always found myself interested in what that was. And at Bowdoin – I'm Jewish – I ended up as president of the Bowdoin Christian Association, and they sent me to Chicago, to the university, it wasn't itself in Chicago, University of Illinois. Champagne-Urbana, I remember that. I went there as a representative of Bowdoin College for the Christian Association conference and immediately got into a big debate with one group who challenged the divinity of Christ. So I belonged right with that group. So that was an exciting time. Anyway, but I had that spark of political interest from, certainly from college on, and always enjoyed whatever involvement I could have.

AL: So do you have from over the years any funny or poignant anecdotes about your friendship with Senator Mitchell?

SL: I'm sure there were many that are buried in the recesses of my mind. I'm trying to think. Anything spectacular, politically different, I think unless something gets going, my memory just isn't good enough to be able to pull them out and say, this was, you know, even the little tour we took of the pictures on the wall brought back some of the stories. In order for me to remember things now, I need that kind of stimulus.

AL: Well tell me about your - You were talking to me earlier about the dinner you went to, probably in New York, and the funny story about Bette Davis?

SL: Oh, okay. Well, I'm not really sure where George's involvement in that was, but it was a dinner where Sam Rayburn was the speaker. It must have been here in Maine, because he was the guest speaker here. And Gary Merrill, who was married to Bette Davis, was at our table, as was a very old friend named John Donovan, who I think you know. He taught at Bates, then at Bowdoin. Worked for Muskie, and decided to run for Congress while he was working for Muskie, but neglected to tell Muskie he was going to do that. So Muskie picks up the paper and sees where his administrative assistant, who is still working for him on his payroll, is running for Congress. He wasn't so happy about that, I think.

But anyway, we're at this dinner – this is the Rayburn story – and Gary Merrill, married to Bette Davis, was at the table. And Gary Merrill said, announced to the group, there must have been eight or ten of us, he says, "Oh, I got to call my wife, she's in London." So we all knew that Bette Davis was his wife, so he went over, and we're all watching as he's dialing and talking. He finally comes over and he says, "Mr. Speaker, my wife would like to talk to you." So Rayburn being an accommodating guy says okay. He gets up, he goes over, and we're all watching as he's talking and nodding his head. And then he came back, and after a couple

minutes he said – Donovan was sitting next to him – he said, “Who was that nervous man who made me go to the telephone?” And he said, “That’s Gary Merrill, he’s an actor and he’s married to Bette Davis.” He says, “Yeah,” he – there was no sign, no glint of recognition – and he said, “And who was the woman I was talking to in London?” And so he said, “Well that’s Bette Davis, she’s the one who’s married to Gary Merrill.” So he just acknowledged it, and in talking about it afterwards, we decided well, his only interest was in politics, he never went to the movies, so he probably didn’t know who either of them were. But there were moments like that that were fun. It’s hard for me to -

AL: Well tell me the story about, you went to Northern Ireland, you went to Ireland to visit Senator Mitchell and what happened then?

SL: He was supposed to pick us up. We were coming by boat.

AL: You and your wife?

SL: Me and my wife, from London I think it was, or wherever you get the boat to go to Northern Ireland. And so we landed, and there’s no George. He was supposed to meet us. So I looked around, and we were approached by Martha Pope – you reminded me of her name – and she said, “The Senator got a call yesterday” – the day before, whatever – “and sends his apologies, but President Clinton called him and wanted him to come over and help him prepare for a debate with Bob Dole, and he couldn’t say no and so he went.”

And so Martha Pope showed us around. And those were tricky times in Northern Ireland, because there were Catholic taxis and Protestant taxis, and one wouldn’t go in the zone of the other. But we fortunately got a taxi, Martha Pope got it for us, where I think the driver was Catholic and his wife was Protestant, so he went to both. And they showed us all around, Martha showed us all around.

And I came away with the feeling that if you went to Ireland and they knew that you knew George Mitchell, you were automatically on the best terms with anybody. They had so much regard for George, that, you know, he was a savior as far as they were concerned. And I suspect to this very day, we’ve been back at least once, maybe twice, that if you tell people – and they believe you – that you’re a good friend of George Mitchell’s, they’ll do anything for you. That’s what, that’s the regard that they have for him in Ireland. And I think it’s still true to this very day.

And isn’t he the chancellor at one of the universities there? And I forget which one, Belfast, I can’t remember which one it is. But he certainly has the highest regard of the Irish people. And many others, but especially in Ireland. So that was my experience there.

AL: Right. Over the years, as he’s faced these different, difficult political situations, has he ever come to you and wanted to talk about it, or does he do that all in private?

SL: Oh no, I think, we would talk all the time about that. I remember telling him, giving him advice that I think he didn't take. Oh, I know, it was when they were discussing baseball commissioner. Now, I'm not a big baseball fan. I'm not a big fan of team athletics. And I remember saying to him, "George, compare what you've been doing and what you're doing in importance with being baseball commissioner." And I says, "There's no comparison. One, you're affecting, you know, a whole nation, a whole world, and the other you're playing baseball," you know. He didn't have the same feeling that I did, but oh yeah, he would not always listen but there would never be a shortage of advice. And he was perfectly open and free to talk about it, and would, you know, and Muskie was really the same way. He would talk about – and he would always say, "Hold on, I got to close the door." Muskie would always do that, he's got to close the door and talk.

But, oh no, George is very open. He's very discreet, he's exceptionally discreet, but not reluctant to talk with good friends about what he was doing and why he was doing it. I think he's always been that way. Your move.

AL: So, before we end today I just wanted to ask you if there was anything I hadn't mentioned so far or asked about that you felt was important to add before we end today? I can always come back.

SL: Yeah, there's nothing that I can bring out of my memory in the manner that we're doing this. I'm sure there are a thousand stories that I haven't thought of, or can't think of now. If I think of something that appears to be important, I'll write it down, and if you give me your contact, I'll contact you. But I've enjoyed the interview.

AL: Thank you very much.

SL: I hope you got something worthwhile.

AL: Oh, I sure did, thank you.

SL: Sure.

Added to end of interview:

AL: We want to add just one more story at the end of this.

SL: You'll hear a lot of stories about Dick McMahon, who was really one of Muskie's very closest friends for years. And when he died, Muskie and George were going up to the funeral, and I was going with them, they'd picked me up – I guess I met them at the turnpike – and we went up to Waterville, to McMahon's funeral, which was a sad affair particularly for Muskie, who had been a friend for years. And McMahon was really a character, you had mentioned they referred to him as 'Friar Tuck,' because he was a rotund, Irish politician, and a likeable guy, and a great cigar smoker. And he'd come down to see me, I guess I probably sold him cars through

the years, and he was always a fun, a fun person. And Muskie had the highest regard and affection for him, and was really broken up at the funeral. But that was one of the recollections I had of doing something together.

AL: Well, thank you very much.

End of Interview