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Interview with Charlie Micoleau by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Charles 'Charlie' J. Micoleau

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Charlie Micoleau
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

GMOH# 044
October 9, 2008

(occasional revisions passim., not noted)

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project. The date is October 9, 2008, and we're at the George J. Mitchell [Department of Special Collections & Archives] offices at Bowdoin College in the H-L Library, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and today I'm interviewing Charlie Micoleau. Charlie, could you just start by giving me your full name?

Charlie Micoleau: You are speaking with Charles J. Micoleau, a resident of Portland, and an attorney by trade. This interview covers the period of 1966 through 1978.

AL: And I know that we covered sort of your background and growing up in the interview you did for the Muskie project, and so researchers can look there for your growing up and education and that sort of information. So I want to pick up today with your first recollections or meeting of George Mitchell, do you recall when that was?

CM: Absolutely. I went to Bowdoin College and graduated in 1963. At some point during that time, '62 perhaps, I visited Washington, D.C., with a couple of classmates, and among the stops we made just as a visitor was the office of Senator Muskie. And George was then the executive assistant to the Senator, a position that I subsequently occupied myself a number of years later. So that's when I first met him. The next encounters with George were more meaningful: I went to graduate school in Washington, D.C., came back to Maine in 1965, and at that time was just making acquaintances with knowledgeable folks in Maine as I was employed in a job training program and working with the legislature. George was practicing law in Portland, and again, as a fellow Bowdoin alumnus, I stopped in to renew our acquaintanceship.

Then, fast forward to 1966 or '67, and George Mitchell was elected chair of the Maine Democratic State Committee.

AL: That sounds right; it's very close to that, that's close enough.

CM: - because Ken Curtis was elected governor in a hotly contested election in 1966 and George was active in Ken's campaign. He was widely admired among rank and file members of the State Committee and was easily elected as chair.

CM: In that same period I became interested and involved with state legislative politics, because the job training program I was working on required a state appropriation, and through this effort to secure continued funding for job training in coastal and Downeast Maine, I met Governor Ken Curtis and his staff, several of whom were friends of mine or became good friends of mine. And sometime in '67, I was invited to consider working for the Democratic Party full time, leaving the position with Maine State government I held. It was an exciting time: there

were fresh ideas for modernizing state government and while the Republicans had regained control of the legislature, there were enough Democrats to be a legislative force to be reckoned with.

So here we go. George Mitchell was chair of the Party, Ken Curtis was governor, Shep Lee was, at the request of both fellows, the volunteer development director, raising money for the State Committee, and Ken Curtis had an idea. He believed that one of the missing ingredients in his legislative initiative was someone to help write speeches and research positions on the policy debates that were taking place in the legislature. George Mitchell shaped that idea a little more fulsomely, and Shep, Ken, and George raised the money for several Democratic action steps to help Ken Curtis. I was one of them.

I was hired in late 1967 by George to be legislative research director of the Maine Democratic Party, and in that capacity was assigned to work with the Governor's Office and the Democratic leadership in the legislature. Emilien Levesque of Madawaska was the House minority leader, his assistant was a young guy from Portland named Joe Brennan, and Floyd Harding of Presque Isle was the minority leader of the Senate (this was all a Republican dominated Legislature at the time).

Well, it only took a few weeks into that 1968 legislative session before it became obvious to me that Ken Curtis's problem was not a lack of articulate members of the legislature or a lack of speech writers or policy wonks. The 'missing ingredient' was that he lacked votes. What he really needed if he was going to get his program passed was more Democrats in the legislature. And this was a view that George Mitchell shared, so in 1968 I got very much involved recruiting Democratic candidates for the legislature. The filing deadline, to my recollection, was March of '68. This was perceived to be very important by Ken and George, and George had a very – in classic George J. Mitchell fashion – a meticulous plan to go about this. He would call me down to his law offices in Portland and we would get out lists and say, "Okay, now here are the people you should meet with, here are the places you should go." I became a guest speaker for local Democratic committees and would meet with potential candidates and, with George and Ken assisting in candidate recruitment, I was driving all over the place in the state of Maine meeting with candidates, and would get together with George once a week or so.

I was twenty-five at the time and had not been involved in politics before. So for me it was a real education as well as a fascinating experience. Also, it demonstrated to me the importance of detail. You could see George's law training in this and how he really focused on detail. If you were going to present a plan or an idea or concept, then it had to be carefully thought through in terms of how is it going to work, who was going to do it, when was it going to get done. That was the way we approached candidate recruitment in '68 with George's leadership.

Well, '68 also was the year that Hubert Humphrey began letting it be known that he admired his old friend Ed Muskie, and if Hubert Humphrey were to get the Democratic nomination for president, then Ed Muskie would have an important role to play. I can't recall at the moment whether it was known specifically that Ed Muskie might be a logical choice for Hubert

Humphrey to be his vice presidential running mate in '68, but that clearly, in Maine at least, this was touted as a possibility.

In the meantime, that was the year that Robert Kennedy announced he was going to seek the Democratic nomination. Lyndon Johnson had withdrawn his candidacy in March. And Ken Curtis, being a protégé of Bobby Kennedy, publicly supported Kennedy's nomination over Herbert Humphrey's. Bill Hathaway, my recollection was, quietly supported but maybe he too took a public position. Ed Muskie, given his style, was quiet on the subject as the May Democratic convention approached in '68.

Well George was in an awkward position, needless to say. He was the state chair but was absolutely committed to Ed Muskie. And there was an opportunity for a public endorsement of Ed Muskie by party leaders. I forget whether it was his candidacy or an endorsement of a neutral position by the county chairs and the Democratic State Committee, but that group must have been probably forty or fifty individuals.

AL: Right, because they were pushing for 'our favorite son' sort of thing.

CM: The question was whether they wanted to endorse Ed Muskie as the Favorite Son of Maine at the Democratic Convention in May. And George managed to get all but two votes out of that whole group in support of Ed Muskie as the favorite son. Again it demonstrated to me that here is a fellow that planned ahead, knew how to count his votes, and once he set a goal was very persistent in achieving it. Even in a situation that was highly controversial, because here was a very popular, among Democrats at least, governor, on a different side of the fence, so there was a risk involved with George's action. It's a testimony to Maine politics and also to George and Ken that, as they went through this, they still remained very good friends, notwithstanding the fact that I think Ken probably resented the notion that Ed Muskie was still going to dictate what the Maine Democratic Party and its leaders should do.

Then George left in July. Ed Muskie got the nomination for vice president in July 1968, and there was a, a hell-bent-for-leather presidential campaign that fall that George spent full time on. I stayed back in Maine with the Democratic State Committee, to see if we couldn't win the Democratic majority in the legislature that Ken wanted. Also in the summer of '68 George was elected Democratic National Committeeman, so as we went into '69, there was another person, Severin Beliveau, elected state party chair in George's place. Severin and I, being a lot closer in age, had a lot of fun in that fall campaign, except we ran out of money and so I had to find another job, this time with a Maine AFL-CIO job training program.

But, by the fall of '69 we're approaching an Edmund S. Muskie senatorial reelection campaign in 1970. He had narrowly lost the vice presidency, was being discussed as a possible presidential candidate in '72, so winning by a big margin in 1970 was very important. And in the course of Ed Muskie becoming a national figure, he took positions and spoke on issues that really were politically controversial in Maine – I don't want to say they were not relevant to Maine, but they certainly were not the positions that a senator from Maine would involve himself with naturally –

and so there were serious questions about Ed Muskie's age and whether he was out of touch with the Maine voter. It was in that context that George suggested to Don Nicoll, as I recall, and to the senator that I should be employed in the Washington, D.C., office, to deal with scheduling and constituent questions, because I knew Maine so well, having traveled all around recruiting these candidates. Later, when the time came to formally open a campaign office, I might assume a position in the campaign. George became manager of the campaign as it unfolded – I think the official chair may have been Ken Curtis or other distinguished figures.

I went down to Washington in 1969 with the expectation, as you got into 1970, that I would be coming back up to Maine and working directly with George. There was a fair amount of communication as George was building the campaign apparatus into the spring of '70. I came back up in May-June time period to the campaign offices in Waterville. They were across the street from where Ed Muskie's former law offices were, and his Senate office was. George and the senator's good friend, Dick Dubord, were in Waterville and involved with that campaign.

The people that George pulled together for the 1970 re-election campaign were sort of an interesting group, if you think about it in hindsight. John Martin was treasurer; Billy Alford, who then, as I recall, had just graduated from college, was in the office; Tom Allen, who had graduated from Bowdoin in probably '66, had been a Rhodes Scholar so he was just fresh back from England. And we all worked in the same upstairs, unventilated, stuffy office, that George would come in two or three days a week and then he'd be on the phone every day.

So that's where we all worked with George. Ed Muskie did carry Maine overwhelmingly in 1970 and allowed Ed Muskie the political freedom to then run for president. A lot of the credit for the running, the details of that campaign, went to George, and should go to George because he really worked terribly hard, traveled all over the state, and had a strong sense of how to organize the senator's support.

AL: How did he relate to staff?

CM: At that time? Well, he was a volunteer. He was the campaign chair, he related to his volunteer role more than anything else because he was asking people who themselves were volunteers. There were only four or five of us that actually received some income from the campaign, so it was much different than today when you had several million dollars for a U.S. Senate campaign. I forget how much we raised, but I'm sure it was less than a hundred thousand dollars.

AL: So you mostly did it for experience and because you enjoyed it, not because you were going to live off it.

CM: No, I had to live off it, because I had one child already at home, born in September, 1969.

[p/o]

CM: But to go back to George's leadership style, he was clearly the strategist, and a very good one, and he was also an elected official within the party, he was very articulate and an excellent spokesperson. But this other dimension that perhaps others weren't as familiar with at the time, is how well organized he was; how detailed he was. Overall, he was just a good-humored person. He didn't yell at people, and he had a, some of his jokes were actually funny at the time. And he didn't repeat them as often as he subsequently did.

Next, after the 1970 election, I went back to Washington and George was Democratic National Committeeman. It was clear Ed Muskie was going to be able to take a run at the Democratic nomination for president in '72, and that of course meant going immediately to work the day after the Muskie reelection campaign in Maine. George went back to practicing law but was intimately involved with Don Nicoll and Berl Bernhard, and others, as the Muskie presidential exploratory campaign got off the ground. All that happened inside Berl Bernhard's law offices in downtown Washington, so George was constantly flying back and forth from Maine and on the phone as the pace built.

At some point George sought the chairmanship of the Democratic National Committee, and my recollection – and this date we'll have to check – but my recollection was that it was in '72, but it may very well have been '73 [it was in December of 1972], after the presidential campaign. But I worked closely with George in that. Several of us that were in Washington knew and liked George, worked very hard on that. And George was a wonderful candidate because you'd say, "Here are ten people you should call," and he'd call every one of them. And it was so nice to have that willingness on the part of a candidate, because a lot of candidates just won't do it, or they do it in a halfhearted way, or they don't get their lines right or whatever it might be, and George was always very willing in that regard. He didn't win that election, he lost to a Californian, Chuck Manatt [*sic*: Robert Strauss won a three-way race against Charles T. Manatt and George Mitchell], but it was fun, we did it.

But let's continue. I guess I could comment somewhat on George in the Muskie presidential campaign, but I was on the road for weeks and weeks and weeks during that period. George was trying to be in Maine and in Washington and on the plane and putting, being troubleshooter during that whole time so we didn't see as much of each other. And then we all, in '73, sort of licked our wounds; George went back to practicing law, putting his practice back together again.

I saw George in a different light during that '73-'74 period when I worked in the Senate, or in the office of a Maine senator, responsible for, among other things, the constituent services; also, dealing with the executive branch which, at the time, was a Nixon executive branch so it wasn't always as friendly as it might have been. I shouldn't leave the implication that a Democratic executive branch was any more friendly, because that was not the case, at least with Jimmy Carter's administration. It turns out a bureaucrat is a bureaucrat regardless of who the president is.

George was then practicing law, and from time to time he would come down, as did other Maine lawyers and Maine constituents, and I can remember distinctly accompanying George to HUD,

the U.S. Housing and Urban Development department, on a housing project – I forget what town it was in. But it was a real demonstration to me of what the practice of law can be like and that the level of detail and understanding of – in this case it happened to be HUD mortgage financing, coupled with either low income or senior citizens housing at the time, and George had this tremendous breadth and depth in his grasp of the details of these programs. He was an articulate advocate, and really needed no help. My role was really just to accompany them and then follow through on the project, but all this had to do with securing approval of applications. They were not going to be approved by HUD just because Ed Muskie said it's a great idea to have senior citizens housing in Maine. They were going to be approved because there was somebody like George Mitchell that made sure everything was filled out properly and that there were all these details attended to.

Similarly, I can remember George being involved with historic preservation tax credits, which is something that – I forget what year, that may have preceded '72 – but Ed Muskie was the author of some very important amendments that promoted preservation of historic properties, and one of the incentives was a provision in the tax code that made it advantageous not to tear down old buildings but to preserve them. And this, you should remember, was a period that followed a decade or so of mass destruction, of urban renewal, which was essentially just bulldozing down half of Waterville, for example, but every major community in America had that same experience. This historic preservation law of Ed Muskie's was the beginning of a serious effort to change all that. And I remember, again, dealing with George on another one of these constituent requests, and this one happened to come from a municipality as well. Thus- I've forgotten again where it was. It was very impressive to me to see how a simple policy statement, "Let's save historic property, it's important," moved to community activism (because that's the period when there was a community response to the excesses of 'urban renewal' such as tearing down of Union Station in Portland), to the reality of putting real at-risk dollars by builders and developers and attorneys, and other engineers and specialists actually making these things happen. That is part of what inspired me to go into the practice of law. And George Mitchell was in the center of that kind of activity.

Then George decided to run for governor in '74 – and that might be a moment to pause so I can have a glass of water or something.

(Pause in taping)

CM: All right, Charles Micoleau, continuing. George Mitchell ran for governor in '74, but he obviously would have started in '73 at some point. And Ed Muskie's official position was neutrality during, up through the primary, yet all of us in the Muskie office were very friendly to George, knew him as a friend and followed his campaign very carefully. One of my responsibilities was to accompany the senator in his trips to Maine and arrange his schedule, so I got a chance to, at least on a number of occasions, cross paths with George in a campaign context and to see how he handled himself.

I'm sure George has his own observations on that campaign, but at least to put it in the context of

some of my observations, here is my view of what became a three-way race, with Jim Longley running as an Independent. The awkwardness within the Democratic inner circles was that Jim Longley was able to run because Ken Curtis, as governor, had given Longley a platform to do so by appointing Longley the chair of a blue ribbon commission to identify and eliminate waste in government and improve the efficiency of government – at least that’s the way Jim Longley viewed his responsibilities. That was the platform from which he ran his own campaign as an Independent candidate for governor, in effect running *for* efficiency, *against* waste, and *against* both Democratic and Republican parties. Longley was going to represent the ‘people.’

So it was in that context that my observation would be that George was stiff as a candidate, he was uncomfortable. He was much more comfortable planning a campaign than he was being the candidate, which was odd. Particularly when you look at him subsequently. Now, he’s so relaxed and self-confident. But he hadn’t quite hit his stride during that campaign, or at least the early phases of it. He also had white socks at one point, I remember that distinctly. Who can vote for a candidate with white socks and loafers? Along with his universal, ubiquitous grey slacks and blue blazer. But he loosened up in the course of that campaign and finally developed his cow jokes and some other things that were, you know, pretty good. But he lacked that self-effacing, self-deprecating humor that is such a trademark of his now. Not that he was joyless, but -

AL: Charlie, I haven’t heard the cow joke. Can you tell it?

CM: Not off the top of my head, I’ll have to go dig it out. He repeated it every campaign stop. But it may not have been at the governor campaign, it may have been in his first Senate reelection. We’ll get you the cow joke before you finish.

AL: I’ve heard it referred to, but I haven’t had it told to me yet so I’m just dying to know.

CM: Oh. So we’ll –

AL: Okay, well I find -

CM: We’ll find someone to tell it, but I’ll get the lines. In any event, George was running a solid, steady campaign against the Republican nominee, who was a very traditional conservative, Jim Erwin, attorney general, former legislator, etcetera, etcetera. And George, like most everybody else except the voters, did not take Longley seriously until it was too late. And that may have been compounded by the fact that – I don’t know what George’s view would be – it appeared to a number of folks that George was well ahead, and he chose in October not to take risks and to keep a steady-as-she-goes kind of a campaign. Well, what that overlooked was the fact that Longley, this maverick Longley’s appeal grew at the expense of Jim Erwin, who dropped out of sight in a brief moment. This Republican, conservative Republican campaign went up in a puff of smoke in the last few weeks of October, and Jim Longley, the Independent, picked up the conservative Republicans bailing out of their support of Erwin.

What happened at the end of that campaign was interesting – and this is something that I was not privy to, but you may find those that are, you might want to pursue it a little bit. There was a period at the end of October when Ed Muskie, the Senate went out, Ed Muskie came up here and campaigned full time in the last probably two weeks in October-November of '74. And Ed Muskie could sense what was happening; I mean he was uncanny in that regard. Just put him out on the stump for three, four days, and he'd come back and tell you what was really going on within the electorate. And he had some conversations with George that I suspect were rather candid assessments of how that campaign was going, what George might do and could do and should do. And I, again, was not privy to it, and I've never really heard the results of that but - George lost that campaign in 1974.

AL: But you heard that Senator Muskie had some concerns.

CM: Yes.

AL: Did he voice them to others around you?

CM: Well, certainly the immediate staff. And it was a scary period because we, let's face it, we'd all been associated with Ed Muskie when he was shoo-in and lost in '72, or didn't win as strongly in New Hampshire, for example, as he should have, or the expectations were. And it was clear that Jim Longley was coming on strong, and then began to get some newspaper endorsements. George lost, Ken Curtis comes out of office in January of '75, starts the law firm in which I subsequently became a partner, and George goes back to practicing law.

Now what I can't recall is when George – and this is where the time periods, again, are a little fuzzy, I'd have to go back and refresh my recollection – when the opportunity arose for George to be, seek to be, appointed as a federal judge. The opportunity arose because there was created a second judicial position in Maine. Judge Gignoux had been the Maine sole federal district judge, and was able to convince the court that his work load was such that there needed to be another position. There must have been some very interesting politics associated with creating additional judgeships, and I'm not quite sure when that took place but there was created this extra position. Now, did it happen in '75 under the Nixon, or by then it would be the Ford administration, or did it happen in '76 when Carter came in?

AL: I'm guessing Carter.

CM: Well, Carter enabled George to be appointed.

AL: I believe George was the first one appointed.

CM: He was, and so maybe this all did not happen until Carter had come in as president in 1977. But in any event, it was very clear that there was going to be a process followed of screening candidates and other people could express interest in being a candidate for the appointment. And I am pleased to say that through the whole time, within the Muskie office, it

was a very transparent and balanced and fair process. One might add a footnote to that, that there was no need for it to be anything else, because George was so superbly qualified. He received great reviews by his peers, he clearly is very smart. The real question in my mind that I can remember discussing with him is, why did he want to do it? I mean, did he really wish to withdraw from politics so thoroughly? Because there were those like myself that felt that he had so much to offer as an elected official that it would be a shame to see him put himself in a position where he couldn't run or be active in politics. And my recollection of his explanation was that if you're a lawyer, one of the heights of ambition, if you're a good lawyer and you respect and admire the law and enjoy its practice, is to be in a judgeship where you're a tryer of fact, as well as law.

And that had an influence on me, because I, at the time, had started to go to law school at night, following in George Mitchell's footsteps. And not only did I get to inherit his desk and the chair that he had occupied in the Muskie office. But he was among those that advised me that, as hard as it was to go to school nights while you had a full time job, it's something that could be done. So, I can remember that conversation about why he was running for judge pretty clearly because it gave me added perspective on what I was doing with the study of law.

So if all this happened after Jimmy Carter's election, then it was in 1977 or '78 that this judicial appointment must have taken place. And I did have occasion to play tennis with George while he was a judge in Bangor, and I found it rather disconcerting that he took his judicial duties so seriously that he no longer foot-faulted the way he used to in tennis, and I can remember kidding him about that, that particular night. I didn't have that much dealings after his appointment, other than occasional social gatherings. Happily I can say I had no occasion to be in court.

AL: And I'll just note before we end, he was a U.S. District Court judge from '79 to '80, so he was probably appointed, '78 period.

CM: Right. We ought to, go look and see when, the history of that second judge position because it may have all happened after Carter came in in January of '77. It may very well have been a year before that second position actually was created, because there's typically a lot of horse trading that goes on to get enough votes, in the Senate at least, to create these judgeships.

AL: Okay, great, thank you.

End of Interview