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Interview with Bill Mitchell by Andrea L'Hommedieu

William 'Bill' E. Mitchell

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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William E. “Bill” Mitchell
(Interviewer: *Andrea L’Hommedieu*)

GMOH# 008
April 24, 2008

Andrea L’Hommedieu: This is an interview for George J. Mitchell Oral History Project, the date is April 24, 2008. I’m in Waterville, Maine, interviewing Bill Mitchell, and this is Andrea L’Hommedieu. Bill, could you just start by giving me your full name?

Bill Mitchell: Sure, William E. Mitchell.

AL: And where and when were you born?

BM: I was born in Waterville, Maine, November 18, 1961.

AL: And is Waterville where you grew up?

BM: Yes, it is.

AL: So in the ‘60s and ‘70s, what was Waterville like, looking at it in terms of what it’s like today?

BM: Sure. Well in the ‘60s and ‘70s, of course, I was just a young boy and a teenager. It was a very family-oriented community, I would say probably a typical middle class American small city, and I was very fortunate to have grown up in a nice, an average neighborhood in Waterville where there were a lot of families. And the families in our neighborhood had children in my age range, as well as a couple of years older than me, and my brother and I and our neighborhood friends would spend a lot of time together, as most neighborhood children would do in that day, and still today I suspect.

AL: How has it changed, how has the Waterville area changed in terms of today?

BM: Well, I think the Waterville area has changed in a couple of ways, Andrea. First of all, our population has shrunk a little bit, and the demographics maybe have changed a little bit as well. We’ve seen a number of larger employers either substantially reduce their workforce or close entirely, and as a result of that a lot of good quality jobs have left the greater Waterville, central Maine area. Which is part of what, I think, has probably changed the demographics somewhat in Waterville, although we still have a strong middle class, you know, working society here. We see a reduction in that workforce as a result, and as well as maybe an increase in the families that maybe are more at need of services that are provided through the community.

AL: Now your dad and his brothers and sister grew up in a Lebanese section of town. Now, you were more integrated into the community, away from that?

BM: Yes, in their day, as I know it, they grew up in an area called Head of Falls, which was predominantly a Lebanese community – part of Head of Falls was, where they lived, was a strong Lebanese community of several families with a large number of children. And although they did spend a lot of time with other segments of the community, they were in their own sense their own little community within Waterville.

When I was a boy, although many of the kids that I went to school with were Lebanese, we were, you know, mixed more with kids from other ethnic backgrounds, and probably were a little less of a close knit community in terms of the Lebanese community. We all knew each other and we were friendly with each other and spent time together, but we had a more diverse set of friends.

AL: What was the Waterville community like religiously? Were there a lot of different segments?

BM: Well, I think, you know, it was predominantly a combination of Catholic and Protestant religions. There's a solid Jewish community in Waterville, then and now, and, but I would say that would really be the predominant religions in the greater Waterville area.

AL: Now when you were growing up, was politics something that was talked about at home and in the community?

BM: Sure, politics was always a popular conversation or topic within the family, and I was, you know, at a young age, introduced to politics. And as a matter of fact, on or about my birth, my father [Paul Mitchell] was running for the board of aldermen, which today is known as the city council, and won his seat I believe either the day I was born or within a day or two of my birth. So he was very involved in politics, and so I was sort of I guess born into it, so to speak.

My uncle [George J. Mitchell, Jr.], obviously, had the greatest involvement in politics, and really between he and, and we were very involved with Ed Muskie's campaigns and would spend a lot of time as a boy doing the most simple things that a campaign would do, things like folding and stuffing envelopes and putting labels on things. I can remember many times helping at my uncle Eddie's, Eddie Atkins, print shop, Atkins Printing Service, where we'd all gather and we'd fold and stuff and label and seal envelopes, and walk around the community and hand out flyers and so on and so forth. So as a boy I was brought along on a lot of that, and have some nice memories of it.

AL: When I was driving up Main Street today I, well I noticed Atkins Printing, and is that, another relative has taken over the business?

BM: Yes, it's actually a great story. Again, my uncle Eddie Atkins, Barbara Atkins' husband,

was a second generation; I believe it's the second generation printer, took the business over from his father and ran a very successful commercial printing operation right up until his passing. And his son Ralph acquired the company at that time, and has run it successfully right up until earlier this year. And two of my Mitchell cousins, Jim Mitchell and Peter Mitchell, have acquired Atkins Printing from Ralph Atkins. And I know that Uncle Eddie would be real pleased to know that his printing business is still within the family and is doing very well.

AL: I want to talk about when you were growing up, observations that you might have made of your Uncle George as you were getting older and he was, well, let's say 1974, must be some memories for you when he ran for governor.

BM: Sure, sure. Again, I would have been just thirteen at that time and so my involvement in his campaign would have been more from a peripheral perspective as compared to my father and mother and the others in the family that would have been a little bit older at that time. But I do remember how exciting, and the energy around the fact that Uncle George was running for governor. And we were all working so hard, especially my father and mother and aunts and uncles and so forth, to help George win the campaign, the election.

And I remember one day in particular, they were canvassing so hard around town to really get people to support George, and there was a tremendous amount of energy around that and a sense that he would win and, you know, right up until the day of the election and the evening. And I don't know, I don't recall because, again, you know, being quite young and not being in the loop by any means of what was going on, but the, you could sense, there was something changing. And then at some point somebody would have, it would have filtered down to me that it didn't look like Uncle George was going to win, and how difficult that was to try to understand it. And even as a thirteen year old, you know, I sensed a, you know, the sense of defeat that took place with that, and I can only imagine how difficult it must have been for my uncle and his family, and my parents and all of the other family members that had worked so hard for him on that campaign.

But it's interesting to see how you never know how things are going to turn out, and I'm a big believer that everything happens for a reason, and his loss of that election happened for a reason, some bigger purpose. And I think history speaks for itself now as to what that, some of those bigger purposes were for him to perhaps not win in that particular election.

AL: Right, because six years later he became senator.

BM: Six years later he became senator.

AL: And you would have been about nineteen and in college?

BM: Right, in college at that time.

AL: Did you have contact with him during that period?

BM: You know, not, not too much actually. I was doing my thing, I was a college student and I was more or less focused on things going on in my life. I started my freshman year at a school in Massachusetts, Western New England College, and after my freshman year decided that I wanted to come back to Waterville. I had met the woman who is now my wife of twenty-five years, and I had a real desire to want to be here with her, as well as, I knew at a young age I wanted to be in business, at some level, of some type, and it just so happened that my father was a partner in a business and it seemed to make sense to come back to Waterville, continue with my undergraduate studies, and have the best of all of it – I'd be with the woman that I wanted to be with and be able to be in a business that maybe some day would become my own, and continue in my studies and so forth.

So I came back to Waterville. I really wasn't too involved in Uncle George's successes in the Senate at that time, I, you know, I obviously in his reelection campaign spent time assisting, like we were all doing, similar to when he was running for governor and so forth, and helping him to become reelected which was, you know, very exciting in those days when he was running against Mr. Emery and it looked like George was probably not going to win, and how that turned around and won with what I believe is still the most successful victory in Maine, I believe, and maybe beyond that. So it was quite a fun time.

AL: Well, talk to me about your relationship with your uncle over the years.

BM: Sure, sure. Well it's certainly changed from when I was a boy to now. When I was a boy, we didn't see Uncle George too much, he was obviously doing the good work that he's done throughout his life, but we would see him around the holidays. Christmas and Thanksgiving, they would come to Waterville, we would all meet at Sitto and Jiddoo's, my grandparents, and have time together where all of us would be there, Sitto and Jiddoo, their children, spouses, all of the grandchildren, and we would celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas together in their home.

Being one of the younger grandchildren, the way we would have dinner, Sitto and Jiddoo had a nice dining room where the adults would congregate, and the two or three oldest grandchildren, one of which is my oldest brother, had graduated to sitting in the dining room with my parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles. And I never really had the privilege of that experience so I'm not really sure what went on in there, but I suspect it was some very high level conversation.

The rest of my cousins and I, we would set up in the kitchen, and we would have the kitchen table and then we'd bring in two other smaller tables and set those up in the kitchen, and those of us who were the youngest cousins, grandchildren – there was only so much room in the kitchen for tables – and so the table I sat at was always right in front of the refrigerator. And so my younger cousins and I would be the ones that would, when anybody ever needed anything we would be the helpers who would grab things from the refrigerator and hand them along so that they'd make their way into the dining room, where all the older cousins and aunts and uncles were, so.

But it was a very special, very, very special time in my life. And then again, through my high school and college years, you know, I would see Uncle George from time to time, he'd come to town, and one of their favorite activities was playing cribbage. And we still play cribbage today, it's just a wonderful game that we've all grown up in. And so Uncle George and my father and my Uncle John, 'Swisher' Mitchell, Uncle Robbie, Uncle Eddie would all gather and play cribbage, into all hours of the night. And, you know, they'd allow us, at a, particularly, especially a younger age to, you know, as long as we didn't ask questions and we didn't get too close, they'd allow us to watch and learn and so forth.

But in my teenage years and even into my twenties, the relationship with Uncle George was that of what I've just described. But as we've gotten older and as I've gotten older, the relationship has certainly changed a lot I think for, very much for the better for me. I've been able to spend a lot of time with my uncle over the last several years. He and his wife Heather and their two children, Andrew and Claire, visit with my family, my father and mother and Vicki and I and so forth at our summer home in, on Great Pond, in Belgrade. And we've had some wonderful times together fishing, swimming, tubing; it's been a lot of fun participating with them, and spending good quality time. Barbecues, blueberry pie, Uncle George -

AL: Aren't those the best things.

BM: They are the best. And Uncle George and Heather would, when they come they always bring a fresh blueberry pie. He loves sweets, and so after dinner he would help clear the dishes, somewhat anxiously I think, to get to dessert. And so we'd all share in the blueberry pies with ice cream and then settle in for some cribbage. So that's been very nice.

And we also, he and I and Andrew and his grandson Ian, his oldest daughter Andrea's son, went on a wonderful fishing trip two years ago. Andrew loves to fish, and the first thing he always asks me when he gets to camp is, "Can we go fishing?" And so that prior winter, it would have been the winter of I think 2005, Uncle George and I got talking about maybe doing a fishing trip in the summer of 2006, and we, he had been doing a little research on some fishing camps in northern Maine and selected one just outside of Greenville, Moosehead Lake, Little Lyford Camps on Little Lyford Pond.

And so we packed up and went to Little Lyford, which was a wonderful set of cabins in a very remote part of the state, and spent three days fishing and so forth, and it was very enjoyable. We had a great time. We actually only fished for two days, but it was three nights. And the first day we went out on a boat onto Moosehead Lake and the, really the fishing was for Andrew and Ian, and so I was helping them fish, and I was fishing and we had a guide there with us, and it was really a great time.

And as the boys were catching fish and reeling in their fish, they were just, their grins were from ear to ear and I would look over at Uncle George, who would be watching us fish, and he had such a huge smile on his face as he was watching his son and grandson catching fish, and just

enjoying their enjoyment in what they were doing. And that was very special to see how much it meant to him to be there with them, watching them having so much fun.

The second day, we had a canoe excursion down the Kennebec, and Uncle George and I and the boys and a couple of other men and some guides, who helped us put this together, spent the day on the Kennebec River fishing and canoeing, and that was very special too, very unique, great experience for the boys. I'm not sure that my uncle had ever really done anything like that before. I've done some of that, and it was just nice to be a part of it and to, again, to watch the boys catching fish, and Uncle George there with them to be a part of that was very, very special, and a wonderful experience and I'm glad that I was part of it.

AL: Thank you for that story.

BM: You're welcome.

AL: You talked about cribbage being a tradition. Were there other traditions, such as foods, that you shared over the years? I know with a Lebanese background, are there things that have still been passed down to your generation?

BM: Oh sure, sure. Sitto was a wonderful cook, and unfortunately for me, as a boy I was somewhat fussy in terms of what I would eat or not eat. That's changed a lot, but Sitto would cook all the time traditional Lebanese food – kibbee [also spelled: kibbeh], cabbage rolls, grape leaves, and breads, and everything was just as fresh, right out of the oven. It was, the things that I liked were just fantastic. And those recipes have been passed on to my mother and my Aunt Janet and Aunt Prin, and of course Aunt Barbara, and they all, over the years, have cooked Lebanese food within their families.

And what's really special is that my generation, our spouses and so forth and the, my [sister and female] cousins, have all taken on those recipes. At a personal level, my wife Vicki is a wonderful cook and has learned many of Sitto's recipes and has, you know, over the course of time, has cooked many, many wonderful Lebanese meals for us. So yeah, it's kind of a special tradition that's been passed along generation to generation. I am confident that my daughter Beth, who is now twenty-two, will also, she's actually spent time with my mother, her grandmother, learning how to cook Easter cookies, Lebanese Easter cookies, kibbee, and some of the other traditional foods that Sitto taught to all of us. And so I think it's going to carry through to at least another generation, and I'm sure cousins in her generation throughout the rest of the family will probably be a part of that as well.

AL: I want to ask this question, I want to ask it correctly – but as you've lived in Waterville and your uncle's been on the sort of national and international scene, how have the community reacted, from your perspective, to his successes?

BM: Very favorably. Uncle George is thought of very highly throughout the Waterville area, and he is really well received throughout the community. And when he comes back to visit,

which he does frequently for a variety of functions, everyone, every function that I've been a part of with him, is just so pleased to see him and to be somewhat a part of maybe his success through the Senate, in terms of supporting him and so on and so forth.

In terms of how we're seen or perceived by others, there's really, we look at, George's success is based on the good work that he's done. We just happen to be related to him. And so, you know, we're fortunate for that and appreciate the great work that he's done. But the community recognizes George for the work that he's done, and in terms of how they interact with me or my father or uncles and aunts and cousins, I don't think it really changes how we are interacting with the community. It really is just good feeling, good energy throughout the community for the work that he's done.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think is important to add?

BM: Well, you know, I think that one of the things that my grandparents did a wonderful job with their children was instilling values. And they put so much energy into their family, and really has carried through the generations a real strong sense of family value. And you see it with the way my father and Uncle George, and Uncle John, and Uncle Robbie, and Aunt Barbara, and their spouses, my aunts and uncles, have always gotten along so well and have put such an importance on the family. And I think if you asked any one of my family members – that would connect back to the family values that Sittoo and Jiddoo had themselves, and as examples, have carried out through the generations. They put a tremendous amount of emphasis on education and were able to see their five children through undergraduate programs – at a minimum – and some graduate programs as well. And I think that is a big part of the success that each of them have had.

And when you look at my father's generation, George's generation, their emphasis was as great on their children to get as educated as we possibly could, and that it would somehow be beneficial to us. And I think that that's passing through now to the next generation, to what would be Sittoo and Jiddoo's great grandchildren.

And I look back, and you try to, you know, put your finger on how did that, where did that all start, the nucleus of all of that, and it continues to point back to Sittoo and Jiddoo and their belief in family values, importance of education, and a strong work ethic, a sense of community and helping others and, you know, being good community individuals. And I think they did a fabulous job in instilling those values into their children, and then subsequently into their children, and now going into my daughter's generation.

So it's kind of an exciting thing to be a part of, and I know I'm very appreciative to be part of the family and a wonderful group of people who care about one another tremendously. So it's very satisfying.

AL: Are there others in your generation of the family that would have some unique perspective or experiences with your uncle that I should talk to? I don't know that I should talk

to everybody.

BM: Right, right. Well I know that my cousin Susan was very involved, John's daughter, was very involved politically throughout Uncle George's various campaigns and could probably talk about that quite a bit. Mary Mitchell Friedman, Robbie's daughter, who is the president of the Mitchell Institute, would be able to talk extensively I'm sure about the great work of the Mitchell Institute and how that plays into – it's such a top priority for George, you've probably heard him say many times, second to his family it's the most important thing to him. So Mary would be, I think probably, another real good sounding board as well.

AL: Good, I have her. And what is Susan's married name?

BM: Susan Mitchell.

AL: Oh, Mitchell, okay. And now, you're also related to the Baldacci family.

BM: Yes.

AL: Are you close to them at all, or have the generations -?

BM: Well, I know Governor John Baldacci and his brother Robert well. Yeah, wonderful people, wonderful people.

AL: Great, thank you so much.

BM: It's my pleasure. Thank you.

End of Interview