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Interview with Ann Tartre by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Ann P. Tartre

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Recommended Citation

Tartre, Ann P., "Interview with Ann Tartre by Andrea L'Hommedieu" (2009). *George J. Mitchell Oral History Project*. 16.

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Ann P. Tartre
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

GMOH# 139
September 11, 2009

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College, the date is September 11, 2009, and I am speaking [by telephone] with Ann Tartre in California, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Ann, could you start just by giving me your full name?

Ann Tartre: Yes, my name is Ann Pauline Tartre.

AL: And where and when were you born?

AT: I was born in Biddeford, Maine, in 1966.

AL: And did you grow up in the Biddeford area?

AT: I did, born and raised there, yes.

AL: What was Biddeford like in the, well '70s really, and '80s, when you were there.

AT: Biddeford is a mill town so there were three mills basically in the downtown area, and so it was very much a blue collar community and very much a Franco Canadian community. But in the '70s, the economy wasn't doing very well, so it was a pretty depressed area economically, I would say. But on the other hand, it was a very tight knit community and a lot of pride from the Franco families in general and it was a good small town upbringing in a lot of ways.

AL: Right. Now, were you part of that Franco community?

AT: My father is Franco-Canadian, so French is his first language, and so yes, I was. My mom is not.

AL: And what were your parents' occupations when you were growing up?

AT: My dad was a small business owner, he owned his own insurance company in Biddeford called Paquin & Carroll, and my mom was a stay-at-home mom.

AL: And how many brothers and sisters do you have?

AT: I have two brothers and a sister, all older.

AL: So you're the baby of the family.

AT: Yes, I'm the baby, that's right. And they loved to say how spoiled I was, but I don't know about that.

AL: So you grew up in Biddeford, what kind of things did you do socially?

AT: Well, sports was a big thing in Maine in those kind of towns, and so my older siblings all played sports so we spent a lot of time going to football games and basketball games and track meets and things like that. We also had a great neighborhood setting with lots of kids and we just played wiffle ball in the back fields and sort of roamed through the woods, and got ourselves into trouble every now and then, but it was just a really fun growing up time. The kids would, almost like a troop of us kids, probably twenty of us from all different houses in our neighborhood would just kind of roam around and play different games every afternoon or evening, and it was a lot of fun. [We would] ride our bikes all over town; it was a really safe place to be. I don't think people worried the way they do now about their kids being out of their sight, it was just very safe. That was fun.

And Biddeford also has a really beautiful beach area, and so we would go out there in the summertime, just spend the day at the beach, Biddeford Pool. And then my family, for about ten years we also, my parents are originally from Augusta and every summer for about ten years when I was pretty young, we would rent a camp on the lake at Cobbossee in Augusta, and my mom and the four of us kids would go up there during the week, and my dad would come up on the weekends when he was finished work, and we had a boat up there so we would do a lot of fishing and swimming and stuff like that as well.

AL: And, now you said your dad, his first language was French. Did he speak it in the home at all when you were growing up, or had he transferred to English by the time you came along?

AT: He definitely had transferred to English I guess when he was, he grew up in the Sand Hill area in Augusta and when he went to school when he was about six or something they, when he went to school I guess they made them learn English, and his parents were pretty strict about it, too, because they wanted him to learn it. So he is definitely totally bilingual, but my grandparents spoke French. They also spoke English but they spoke French with him sometimes, even when I was a kid. But at home he spoke English to us, so we didn't grow up speaking French at home. I was very interested in it so I studied it in high school, and also it was one of my majors in college. So it was an important part of my heritage to me, and I studied in France for a year, too.

And he also, because of Biddeford's population being, I think at the time when I was growing up, it was almost eighty to eighty-five percent Franco Canadian, with most of those being, you know, that being their first language, so he for his business had to speak French quite a bit. So

even though he wasn't speaking it at home that much, he would, especially with the elderly population, he was speaking it for his business.

AL: Oh, right, so he maintained that, he maintained that language.

AT: Yes, he did, oh absolutely, yeah, he can still to this day, he's seventy-seven, he still can totally switch into it.

AL: And so, I understand you went to Yale for college. How did you choose Yale?

AT: Actually I went to Tufts as an undergraduate, Tufts University in Boston, and I went there because when I was younger I was studying French, and in high school I took a trip to France with our French teacher and I got very interested in sort of politics and international relations, and so I went to Tufts to study international relations and French, and they have a really good program there, because I thought I wanted to be kind of like an ambassador and do foreign service type work. And that was a great experience, but after I graduated I wasn't quite sure that I really did want to go into the Foreign Service so that's when I got involved in politics and – I mean, this is not quite the answer to the question you asked me, but -

AL: That's okay.

AT: But to sort of follow sequentially, I ended up getting a job, after I graduated from undergraduate, this is classic 'small town,' but I didn't really have a job lined up and I was waiting tables in the summer community in Massachusetts on Nantucket. And my mom ran into a girl who I'd gone to high school with, she was a few years ahead of me back in Biddeford, and she was running the local campaign for Congressman Joe Brennan, and she needed some help on the campaign locally, and so my mom had her call me, and offered me a job so I went back to Biddeford and, after I graduated from Tufts, and worked on that campaign for I think it was probably five or six months.

AL: And what did you do on that campaign?

AT: I was a field organizer, so we did everything, we organized phone banks and volunteers to call, and we put up signs all over York County, held events, wrote things. I'm trying to, it seems like a long time ago now, but just kind of general field organizing type stuff.

AL: Right, and did you get to meet Joe Brennan?

AT: I did, yes, and actually that's an interesting side story. [I] met him, and I'm trying to think, he was, yes, it was when he got elected, he had just finished up his term as governor so he was running for Congress, and he got elected, and then when he got elected I got a call from Dave Redman, one of his good friends, saying that they had a job opening down in D.C. and was I interested in going down there. And so I did, I went down and interviewed, and strangely, during that interview the staff person that was talking to me actually got a call from Senator

Mitchell's office saying that Senator Mitchell had an opening in his office. And I was interviewing for a legislative correspondent, I can't remember if it was a similar job in Congressman Brennan's office, and the position in Senator Mitchell's office was on the front desk, answering phones, but in the back of my head I just thought it would probably be better to be in the Senate. So I left the interview with Congressman Brennan's office and contacted the people in Senator Mitchell's office, and I ended up going and getting hired, which was a great decision, obviously, because it was just before he had become majority leader. But I didn't know that that was going to happen and that he would be in the position he was in, but I just thought: probably better to be in the Senate.

AL: Right, so this was in '88.

AT: And the funny story is that in the end my mom ended up, because of my work in Biddeford, and I was living at home at the time when I was working for Congressman Brennan, my mom ended up getting interested in politics. And my parents had just recently divorced and she really never had a job outside of the home, and she ended up getting hired by Congressman Brennan in his field office in Portland, so that became a really important sort of piece of her life and career.

AL: Oh, wow. So you were hired by Mitchell's office, and to work the front desk.

AT: That's right.

AL: And how long did you do that for? Because I know you went on to other things.

AT: I did that not very long, because – I want to say it was probably about six months – because what happened is as soon as he got the majority leader position the size of the staff, what, probably tripled or something like that. So pretty quickly there was a position open, a legislative correspondent position open, and that's actually what launched me into my career, because it happened to be the position that was focused on environmental issues and energy and agriculture stuff, and I before then hadn't really known that I was interested in that but I really loved it, I just dove right into that. And he was very active at that time on environmental issues, going through the reauthorization of the Clean Air Act, and so it was a really exciting time to be working on those issues and I just, I loved that. So I did that for a couple of years, and then I decided to go to graduate school, and that's when I decided to go to Yale to study environmental issues.

AL: Okay, and so did you work on any of the acid rain legislation, or was that earlier?

AT: It was part of that Clean Air Act reauthorization, was the acid rain provision.

AL: Right, okay. And who -

AT: I mean I, again, I was working under the primary people, and you probably have talked

to people like Kate.

AL: Kimball?

AT: Yes, I don't know if you've caught up with her at all.

AL: We haven't caught up with her yet, but we will, I hope.

AT: Yes, she would be great to catch up with, she's amazing, and she was just a superstar on the Hill and I know the Senator really thought highly of her as well.

AL: And was Jeff Peterson also involved in -?

AT: Yes, he was. He was working more on the marine ecosystem issues and water issues for the Senator, at the EPW, and also Bob Davison was working on like wildlife, wetlands stuff.

AL: And so when you first started in Senator Mitchell's office, did you have a chance to meet or work with Gayle Cory at all?

AT: I met Gayle a few times, yes, but I didn't really work closely with her. I'm trying to think when, by the time, yes, she had already moved over to, I guess she was in the Capitol offices, right? I'm trying to remember what her position was exactly.

AL: Yes, because she changed in that time period.

AT: Yes, I met her a few times, but I didn't work closely with her. I was working, Mary McAleney was really the person who was sort of the head of the office in the Russell Building, which is where I was.

AL: Okay, well what was she like to work with?

AT: Mary was great, she is the person who hired me, and she was just really, such a warm and engaging person, and really I think she took on the role of mentoring those of us who were young and just out of college, and in a way this sort of a mother figure to us, and a mentor figure, and I'm sure other people have said that. She really tried to make us feel at home there, and really instill in us this, not instill in me, I think most of us already had it, but sort of the pride of being from Maine and working for the Senator and what an honor it was, but also just sort of knowing it was kind of like the office was a home away from home in a lot of ways I think for most of us coming from smaller towns in Maine, hadn't lived in a big city like that and just not really knowing anyone when we got there, and she really made it feel like a place that was safe and still connected to Maine, which was really nice.

AL: Right, yeah, there always seems to be a strong connection to Maine through the staff. Do you think that brought the staff closer? I know there were quite a few what we'd call

national people, but there were important Maine people always on that staff as well.

AT: Yes, I actually think that was a real bond for those of us who were from Maine. And it was kind of a joke among our friends, because we'd go to parties and stuff on the Hill, given by different staffs from different senators' or congressmens' office, congress peoples' office, and they always would be like, we'd tell them we were from Maine, they'd be like, "Oh no, the Mainers are here." We wouldn't stop talking about how great Maine was, how great the Senator was, it was just like there was this, it seemed more than other places, there was just such a strong sense of connection to the state and the place and the sense of community there, and it drove everyone crazy, everyone else who wasn't from there.

And then there was also the joke where it was like there were so many Mainers all of a sudden appearing, and the elevator operators in the Capitol were Mainers, too. The train drivers were Mainers all of a sudden, after the Senator became majority leader. I don't really know how that all happened but it was like the Maine mafia appeared, and we used to joke, saying the Senator has single-handedly got an employment program going for Maine.

AL: That was great though; he gave a lot of opportunities to Maine kids during that period.

AT: Absolutely, absolutely, it was amazing. And my parents were, for Maine, were doing pretty well, [and] sort of from a bigger town, coming from Biddeford, but some of the kids, just from really small communities and really hadn't had that much opportunity to travel or do things, and it seemed like it just really opened up a lot of opportunities for people.

AL: Now, did you, well, he became majority leader shortly after you arrived on the staff, did you interact with him much, or what sort of relationship did you develop with him in terms of your work on environmental issues?

AT: He wasn't even, by the time I got hired, or actually started, I think I got hired like the month before he took the position, he wasn't even in the Russell office any more, he had already moved over to the Capitol, so I didn't get to see him very much in my position obviously, answering the phone and that kind of thing. So didn't see him very much during that period, and then when I became an LC there were a few times when I was, my interaction I would say mostly during that period was kind of helping to, I was obviously doing correspondence and the mail and things like that, and so I would edit, if there was a really important issue, something that he wanted to see what kind of response we were sending to constituents, he would review those letters and make edits and stuff, so I got to see sort of his thinking that way.

But then personally, I didn't see him very much, maybe if there was a staff party or things like that, until I became, after I went to Yale and got my graduate degree, I actually was invited to come back to become his environmental legislative aide, because Kate Kimball had left at that point. And so when I came back I had a little bit more interaction, although at that point he was really engrossed in the health care debate, so the environment wasn't as prominent as it had been previously. But I did attend meetings with constituents with him in the Capitol Building, I would

go over and attend those meetings, and prepare memos for him, and I think a couple of times I had to accompany him on a floor vote for a particular[ly] important issue, which of course now I can't remember exactly what it was.

So I got to meet him, and he was always, he was a great person to work for, he just always had so much integrity and he treated us, even those of us with less experience, I think respectfully, and you could just tell that he, I mean he was busy but you could tell that he cared about the young people that were on his staff.

AL: Did you get a sense of how he thought through issues, or worked on issues? Do you have a way of describing that, in terms of your interact- ?

AT: In terms of, like both from reading through edits he was making on things I was writing and from the way I saw him in meetings and speeches he gave, and I was involved with helping to write a few speeches too. I mean he was just very analytical, logical and thoughtful, and he just always seemed to bring a balanced approach, but not in a way that it was wishy-washy. It seemed like, just on the environmental issues I know in the '90s, when the Clean Air Act was being reauthorized, he was very passionate about doing the best he could for the environment, but also recognized that he had to compromise, but that compromise is part of the process, and he was willing to do that to get the best outcome he could, rather than have no change at all. And I felt like he had a really reasoned and balanced approach and was trying to be as bipartisan as possible. He was a statesman in every sense of the word, in my view.

AL: And I know – do you have another thought on that?

AT: No, not really.

AL: I know from, Kelly Horwitz had mentioned there were sort of fun things the young staff did, like playing ball in the Red Room, but I don't know what the Red Room is, can you tell me about that?

AT: I was just trying to explain that to my husband last night actually. I'm not sure I can, I'm not sure I'm going to get all the facts quite right, but the Red Room was one of the offices in the suite of offices in the Russell Building, and my understanding is that it used to be the office of John Tower, the senator, and that when Senator Mitchell took it over he didn't keep that particular room in the suite as his office, he changed it to another one. But that particular room used to actually be John Tower's office, and John Tower's career has a lot of scandalous things in it which, I was just saying to my husband, I need to look that up and see exactly what, but there were some sex scandals I think he was involved with, and he wasn't very much liked, at least by our staff.

So the carpet in that room was red, and it was the carpet that had been in his office. Now, at some point I think the Mitchell staff, or leadership, decided to take the carpet, that red carpet out and make it the same, they were redoing the office and they put a new carpet in, but because that

room had belonged to John Tower and he was like such a scandalous figure, the younger people had taken a piece of the red carpet and put it in a frame and kept it in that room as a little sort of irreverent shrine to John Tower, that piece of carpet, and the red room, but was always called the Red Room after that, even though it didn't have the red carpet any more.

And it just happened to be a room where there was a lot of us younger people who were just kind of fun. And you stayed there really long, long hours, just piles and piles of mail to catch up on, and so you'd end up getting a little giddy in the late hours and do silly things.

AL: Well, that's neat. Now, were there other young staff from Maine, or from other places, that you got to know quite well when you worked there?

AT: Yes, I mean Kelly is actually still one of my very good friends, and we actually found out as we were working in the office that we were distantly connected family-wise, we were actually somehow relatives but I hadn't met her before, so she became a good friend. And Kristin Aiello also became a good friend, and my roommate when I was down in D.C., she and I lived together for a couple of years when she was there. Have you been able to catch up with her?

AL: With who?

AT: Kristin Aiello.

AL: I have not, but she's somebody I should probably talk to as well, I have the name on my list but is she back in Maine now?

AT: She is in Maine, yes, she's in Hallowell.

AL: Okay.

AT: She would be interesting to talk to. I mean she wasn't there that long but her mom had I think pretty strong connections to the Senator and she was a big Democratic Party supporter, and I think that's how Kristin ended up down in the Senator's office, and I think it really influenced her and she ended up going back to Maine and running for her local state House seat, which she lost by like twenty votes or something, unfortunately. And we actually held a little fund raiser for her at my house, which was on Capitol Hill, just a couple houses down from the Senator's, [Russell Senate] building, and the Senator came to speak at it and – that's kind of an interesting little story there, too. But yes, she's in Hallowell, and I think I have her email if you want that. But she became a good friend of mine, as well as Sandy Brown, who I think you've also spoken with.

AL: Yes.

AT: They were, Kelly and Sandy were both just out here a month or two ago.

AL: For your wedding?

AT: For my wedding, yes. Wow, you know all kinds of things. Oh, I guess I told you that.

AL: Right, right. Well -

AT: Gary Myrick became a pretty good friend of mine, he's now chief of staff in Reid's office.

AL: Yes, okay, I am, yes, I am finding him at the moment, so good. Well, it sounds like I'm catching the right people, as I talk to people. And you touched on this a little bit earlier, but what kind of influence, broadly, did working in Senator Mitchell's office have on your career? Where have you gone since then?

AT: Well, it was a huge influence. I mean just the sort of introduction to the whole environmental realm, and from his perspective, which I think I just kind of absorbed his way of thinking about it. Things like, just hearing him say over and over things like, 'it's going to cost more for us to do nothing than it will to implement these changes, in the long run,' things like that. Like when the Clean Air Act was being attacked in terms of cost, I always remember that as a really strong argument that he made.

And also his perspective – I remember he and Kate were up literally forty-eight hours, at the end of the negotiations around the Clean Air Act, he didn't go home at all, and they were negotiating with the Bush administration about some of these issues, and he did his best to really come out with a compromise that he thought would work for everyone. And the next day in the papers, the environmental organizations, who should have thought of him as their hero, were attacking what he did, and him. And I remember, I was either in a meeting with him or somehow heard him just really upset about how they were treating him, because here he is doing his very best to make things work and to get something passed, because otherwise the whole thing would have fallen apart, and he was upset that they couldn't see it that way, or that at least, they did probably privately see it that way, but publicly they sort of made these statements about him and the compromises.

And that really stuck with me in terms of my thinking about the environment and the kind of role I wanted to play in the future in that realm, which was to [] to get away from the whole polarized public debate and really focus on things that different interests have in common and places where we can make progress; maybe not as much as we want every time, but progress in that way. And so that really was a huge influence on my way of thinking. And then I ended up, like I said, I went to graduate school to study the issues, and I came out and I think having worked for him opened a lot of doors for me. It also made me realize that, personally, my place probably wasn't in a place like Washington in terms of doing this work, I got frustrated sometimes with that whole public debate and process, and so I decided to be more focused on community level issues and state level issues, and so I went to work back in Maine for a long

time for a foundation that was working on environmental issues.

And now, my most recent job, I think actually about my time in Mitchell's office quite a bit, because I'm working for a sustainable development nonprofit, and the whole idea is to bring a balanced approach to growth in the San Diego area, and looking at environment and economic development, and I think back a lot to the types of arguments that the Senator was making and how he was appealing to the different constituencies, both conservative and liberal, and we have a very strong conservative constituency here in San Diego so it's been helpful to me to think back on that. It just had a lot of influence on me.

AL: Right, and it's interesting to note here that in a lot of the interviews that were done on Senator Muskie, he faced the same problem when he was working on environmental legislation, of the environmentalists attacking him. You know, 'you're not doing enough,' 'you're not going far enough,' and him trying to make them understand you have to take slow steps and do it gradually, and compromise so you make some gains. And that was reflected -

AT: Isn't that fascinating.

AL: Yes, so the opposition doesn't change.

AT: No, no, I know, it can be frustrating. But I think since then some of the environmental groups have kind of started to understand that they have to take a different tack, but back then it was really brutal. And I'm sure the Senator had learned a lot about that from working with Senator Muskie and he modeled a lot of what he was doing on that.

AL: Now, is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think is important to add, any area that I missed?

AT: Well, no, the only thing that just struck me as I was thinking about environmental stuff is, I've been telling this story lately because I've been so frustrated with it, but in 1989 [*sic*: 1991] the Senator wrote that book called *World on Fire*, it was about climate change basically, and it's so fascinating to me that twenty years later, it's fascinating and sad, and I'd love to hear the Senator's perspective on it, but first of all, that book did not get very much attention generally; if you compare that to what's happened with Al Gore's campaign on global warming, I'm really struck by that. And so I always think the Senator was ahead of his time, and people weren't quite ready to hear it.

I went to grad school just a few years after that, and everyone in my environmental program and all the sciences, everyone knew already that this was a huge issue, a huge problem, and were starting to try to talk to people about what to do and whatever, and really nothing happened, very little happened. And you think now, twenty years later, and just a couple of years ago was when it became a mainstream issue with Gore's stuff. I don't really know what my point in saying this is, but it's something that I think about a lot, like I wonder what the Senator's thoughts are about it, and is there anything we could have done differently at the time to make it seem more urgent,

or to get the message out to people? And also things like reflecting on the opposition to the Clean Air Act and the climate change stuff is all from the same companies, the same interest groups, and saying the same argument twenty years later. And you just wonder, even given like the talents of a person like the Senator, is there any, what does that say about our whole public process, and our policy making process?

AL: Yes, and we could look at it from the health care standpoint, too.

AT: Exactly, yes, really, it just strikes you that it just takes a long time sometimes to make things happen. And then also I just wonder about, like reflecting on those times when we were there, right before the Senator left, and I think people already sensed that there was kind of a shift on Capitol Hill, in terms of the way that the parties were dealing with each other. I know the Senator has been, and some of his colleagues, his relationship with Bob Dole and others on the other side were very different than what they ended up being in the mid- to late '90s, and a lot of folks like the Senator and others that had similar kind of willingness to do bipartisan work to get things done, left right around the same time, and that's just interesting as well.

AL: Did you have a chance to observe at all his relationship with Senator Dole?

AT: Yes, I was in a couple of meetings with them, and just also, I'm trying to think, well the Senator, he came to Maine and I think invited Senator Dole to come and speak and so I, you know, it was like a fund raiser or something. Oh, I forgot to mention that, when I went back to Maine I worked for the Maine Community Foundation, which at the time was administering the Senator's scholarships.

AL: Oh, the early scholarship, yes.

AT: Yes, when it first started, and because I had worked for him I was the staff person at the foundation who was overseeing it, so for three years I did that and I worked with his sister Barbara, and Janet, his sister-in-law, and that was kind of another neat way to be connected to him. But anyway, I think it was through that, that I saw Senator Dole come and speak and saw them interact together as well, which was really a nice, it seemed like a really nice relationship, and it was so refreshing.

AL: Right. Well if you look at it overall, his whole career, what do you see as what's going to be lasting in terms of what people remember? Because he's done so much, his Senate career, and then he did Northern Ireland, and then he developed the Mitchell Institute, it's hard to -

AT: I really think the Northern Ireland stuff is memorable. Most people I know from different parts, I mean obviously everyone in Maine knows a lot about what he did, or at least of a certain generation. But nationally, you know, I've lived in New York and in California, and when I talk to people about him, mostly the thing that he's remembered for by others is the Northern Ireland stuff. And some people do remember the Middle East work that he was doing, and I guess still is doing to a certain extent. But yes, I would say the Northern Ireland work.

And I think smaller groups of people know about his work on the health care issues during the Clinton administration, but I'm not sure that would be the most memorable thing in the end. I mean for me it'll always be the whole Clean Air work but, that's something that was really important, but unknown to the general public, most people don't know about that.

AL: Right, no, that's true. And it has held up pretty well, hasn't it, in terms of other administrations trying to weaken those protections?

AT: Right. I think it did do pretty well. I haven't really followed the details of what's been happening since then, but it was a landmark piece of legislation at the time. And I recently was reading in relation to climate change and this whole idea of cap and trade for carbon emissions, I was going back and reading about what some of the results, because that's when was put into place the first cap and trade legislation, and I was reading about the results and there are people saying there are mixed results, but over all my sense when I was reading was that it had worked and it could serve as a real lesson for other cap and trade programs in terms of what worked and what didn't work. So I think even that was a huge accomplishment, it was the first time it was really tried in the United States. And now the new legislation on climate change is being modeled after that to a certain extent. But yes, I would say generally that those provisions had stayed pretty sound.

AL: All right, well I'm going to say thank you very much for the interview, and I'm going to stop the tape now.

AT: Okay, sounds good.

End of Interview