

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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John and Prin Mitchell

(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project. The date is April 24, 2008, I'm at the home of John and Prin Mitchell in Waterville, Maine, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu interviewing. Could you start just by giving me your full name?

John Mitchell: My full name is John Peter Mitchell. I live in Waterville, Maine, now, was not born in Waterville. My older brother Paul and I were born in Massachusetts, where our parents were working in the late '20s. I was born in '27, Paul was born in 1926, and we moved back to Waterville when I was maybe three or four and Paul was four or five, because my adopted grandfather had passed away and my grandmother, adopted grandmother, was alone and my father came back, and that's how we came back to Waterville, Maine.

I'm eighty-one years old now, probably six-and-a-half years older than George. So, during the growing up time, George was like most young people. He had a lot of good points, but he could also be a little itchy at times because of difference in age and – when Paul and I were in high school, George might have been in junior high school. And he was always a bright kid, he loved to read, and bright kids know they're bright, and we knew he was bright, so those things happened.

But anyway, George, George was like most young people. He loved to play baseball, he loved to play basketball, and we lived close to the Boy's Club where we all used to go after school hours, and developed athletic skills and our social skills there, during that time.

The one thing about George, he always loved to read, and in those days – we called them funny books, they're comic books now. I don't know the name of them because I never got involved in that, but Prin, do you know the name of the comic books? You never read them either, but anyway, I think he must have read every single comic book that was ever published. Because in those days, Andrea, you would, he might have three or four of his own, a Superman or whatever it is that they had, and he would sit and just read them right through, and then go down the street to one of his friends, his buddies, who might have three or four others, and then they would swap. And then when he got done with those he'd go to somebody else's home where they had three or four others, and it was a constant reading of – and we always thought it was kind of foolish to be reading funny, we called them funny books, all the time. But obviously, even at that age, George knew what he was doing, because he had a great love for reading.

And beyond that, my father, it does something pretty good I think for the *National Geographic* magazine, I think he helped to save somebody's life who might have been drowning and got an award, so he was always a *National Geographic* lover, and we all got to love geography because of the *National Geographic*. And I think Paul and myself, Robbie and George in those days could name probably every country in the world and their capitals, because my father would always get involved in that.

He was always interested in education, although unfortunately my father only went through the sixth grade and had to support his mother, our adopted grandmother. Maybe somebody else in the family might give

you the background of our history. My father was Irish, and when his mother died, there were five in his family and, the Catholic family, an Irish Catholic family from Boston, and then they would take the five children, because the father at that time couldn't support them, they didn't have jobs, and would put these, the five children in different Catholic churches in New England. And my father was adopted in Bangor, Maine, by an elderly, or an older Lebanese woman, and that's how he got to meet my mother who had come to America as an immigrant, I believe in 1920. <p><p>I think my sister Barbara can correct all those things, but that's how the – but he always had a love for education and knew that to succeed in life, to a great extent, you had to go to college, you had to have a degree. Now my father, my poor dad, sixth grade, went to a French convent here in Waterville, St. Francis, where the brothers spoke only French so my father became very literate. He read, he could read in French, write in French and understand French, and my grandma spoke no English, period, my adopted grandmother, so naturally at home he would learn Arabic so he was fluent in Arabic, understood, could write it a little bit and understood it, and talked it beautifully, and spoke English on the streets.<p><p>And the five of us, my three brothers and myself and my sister Barbara are all college graduates, and the only thing we can do is speak and write English. So there's – anyway, that's part of the history of our young days.<p><p>**AL:** And I wanted to ask you about the area of Waterville, Head of Falls and the Lebanese neighborhood that was down there. Can you talk a little bit about that and the other families that you grew up with?<p><p>**JM:** Andrea, the area around Head of Falls and part of Front Street was pretty much a Lebanese area. The church was located on Front Street, which was walking distance from ninety-five percent of all the Lebanese people, and that probably was the hub of what took place there.<p><p>At one time, after Paul and I had graduated, like say from grammar school, they started a grammar school at St. Joseph's Maronite. And there were two classrooms, the nuns from Mt. Mercy came down to teach – what's the order there, Prin, the nuns?<p><p>**Prin Mitchell:** Ursuline.<p><p>**JM:** The Ursuline sisters came down. So there were two classrooms, and a classroom would be grade one, two and three, and the other classroom was four, five and six. And George began, and he was bright and, I don't know what the name of the sister was, the nun was, but they moved him up to grade two, and shortly thereafter they moved him up to grade three. And the only concern my brother Paul and I had, who was athletic, because we were all athletes in the family, and we said to my father, "Geez, don't move him up any more because he won't be able to play ball when he gets to high school." That was our concern, not the educational part of it.<p><p>But the Lebanese community was a tight knit community. The Joseph family, the Jabars, the Ferrises, there were a number of outstanding families, and many of the Lebanese population, many of the children did go on to college, become lawyers and doctors and teachers and have done very well.<p><p>And another place that wasn't too far from there, Andrea, was the Boy's Club, which played a great role in our young days. After school we would spend two, three, or four hours at the Boy's Club, and it was always easy for my mother to know that we were there because she felt very comfortable that we were in good hands at the Boy's Club, which was truthful, right. And so that played a great role.<p><p>I don't think at that time George Mitchell was a great athlete. Probably the best thing that ever happened to him, that he wasn't a great athlete. Paul played football, basketball, baseball at the high school, and I did, and Robbie did. George was the youngest and was not a rugged guy by any means, and he was somewhat sickly I guess, is that what they say, Prin? You know about George because you were there. But anyway, my mother, my mother used to go to Clinton, Maine, which is ten miles up the road, to

buy goat's milk for him, because supposedly, that was supposed to be good for you. Obviously it paid off, because that's the only part of his life, food wise, that he did other than we did, and look what happened to him. So he's done pretty well. <p><p>And as time would go on, all of these young guys – George is very friendly with a number of the Josephs, Alfred Joseph and Ruthie – Ruthie at one time was the mayor of Waterville, and they were classmates. There were three different Joseph families there, all, but not related, and Tony Joseph was another one that George was familiar with, and Tony Jabar, which is the Jabar family, they're a very popular family in Waterville, and throughout the state of Maine. The youngest one, Joe Jabar, is now a judge, and they've done very well.<p><p>So the Lebanese community – and there were a couple of stores there, and most of the Lebanese men were laborers, they either worked in the mill or worked in the railroad, and so they had a great work ethic, all of them. And my father worked for Central Maine Power and worked fifty-one weeks a year when he was young, and he was a jackhammer drill man. So, we all learned to appreciate hard work and, from my father and the whole community.<p><p>And as time goes along, as you saw today, when we went down there for a ride, it's all changed now because there are very few Lebanese families down there – because you mixed in with the rest of the community, like I have with Prin, you know, so we, we met across the bridge, Prin and I did, she was the head cheerleader at Winslow and I was playing basketball, and like I told you in the car, we used to beat them regularly and she finally said, "That's it, I'm going to join ...". Anyway, that pretty much summarizes. <p><p>And the church, St. Joseph's Church played a big role. I know my father used to have George in the next room, reading the Epistle, and not saying anything and not saying anything. I think most of George's speaking habits came from those days when he would stand in the other room and read the Epistle, because a lot, I'm sure that he was, like we all did at one time or another, were altar boys at St. Joseph's and you had to read the Epistle at times, and he became very adept at it, as you know, he's an excellent public speaker now.<p><p>**AL:** And so your father would ask that he practice the enunciation, or?<p><p>**JM:** All the time, all the time.<p><p>**AL:** And did your father do that with you as well?<p><p>**JM:** No, no, for whatever reason, Paul and I and Robbie were engrossed in football, basketball, and baseball. Not that we didn't like school or we didn't do at least reasonably well in school, but George wasn't quite in that mold and, as we've all said, thank God he wasn't, because his life changed. I think they'll tell you about it, and maybe the Senator will tell you, but when he got to the high school there was one teacher that became very special to him, a Mrs. Whitten, an English teacher, and who really challenged George to read books and to do well, and he's often mentioned her in his growing up. I think that was a threshold for the Waterville school system. And then I think, as I look back on it, I think his days at Bowdoin, I think Bowdoin really molded the adult part of his life, that they were very good to him at Bowdoin. The family didn't have much money, and they were, through scholarships and jobs that they gave him, he was able to, you know, maintain the funding.<p><p>And by the way, he did become a fairly good basketball player. He played at Bowdoin. Now I don't know whether that's good or not, because Bowdoin, I'm not sure whether Bowdoin was a good basketball team in those days, but we'll leave it at that.<p><p>And I should tell you now that he's become a pretty good athlete, and probably it's payback time, because when we were young and we had a basket hung up on the garage, we used to have pickup games. And Paul and I were the older ones so we'd flip a coin, we were going to play two-on-two, whoever won would have the first choice. Well the first choice was always Robbie; he was younger than we were but bigger than they were, meaning George and Barbara.

So if Paul won he would pick Robbie, and then that would leave me with the choice of picking either George or Barbara. And I have to admit, half the time we picked Barbara, both ways.<p><p>But now when we play tennis, well we have over the past fifteen years, George and Barbara would be the partners playing against Paul and me, and he would actually whip us like six-love and six-one and six-two, and I think he was paying us back for all those days when we were picking Barbara.<p><p>So those are nice stories about Head of Falls, King Court and Front Street, with George Mitchell. And we always knew, Andrea, that, I didn't have much to do with his high school days because Paul joined the navy and I joined the navy shortly thereafter, then I went to university of Rhode Island so I was away for four, five or six years and so I didn't have much to do, except when you'd get home. But I think that maybe Paul, my brother Paul can give you a little more explanation about it, because he did come home to see George often. <p><p>But we knew that he was going to be a special person. We really didn't imagine that he would go where he is today, to be that, but we were quite happy when he was running for governor and quite sad when he got beaten. Maybe it was the best thing that ever happened. But then when he became a senator, and I remember speaking to someone, they said well your brother George is too scholarly and, you know, he's got to do things that the ordinary person – I said, well he's got two and a half years to go in Senator Muskie's term, when Muskie became the secretary of state. And I said, when people meet George in small groups, twenty, thirty people, they'll get to know him and they'll get to respect him, and they'll learn to love him.<p><p>And I think at the time I spoke, at that time, to this person, they had put out that David Emery, who was a congressman, who was ahead of George 63 to 30-something, and of course when the election came it was reversed, George Mitchell got the 63 to 37, and then of course you know the rest of that, he became even more popular with – you know, his last term as a senator, I think he got like 82 percent of Maine, which means that he got a substantial number of Republicans who felt that he was just an outstanding person, so. <p><p>You know, as I've seen him develop over the years, it's just amazing that, you know, they used to say, "Oh, you must be Paul Mitchell's brother", or "John Mitchell's brother, the basketball players'," something like that. Well, the word has turned now and people say "Oh, are you George Mitchell's brother?" now, so it's all turned around.<p><p>**AL:** And I just wanted to ask you about how, in what ways George was able to keep in close contact with the family and keep you included in the activities and development of his career?<p><p>**JM:** Well when he was a majority leader, and his travels to Maine, Andrea, he always stayed, or most of the time he stayed with my sister Barbara and would go from there. But when certain dignitaries in the political world, mostly Democrats, Hubert Humphrey and others, would come to Maine, he would always include my mother and father to be able to meet them, and was always good to the rest of the family; we always got invited to D.C. if there was a special function. You had to pay your own way, this was not a gratis thing, but it was always nice to go there. And he was always very considerate, and I've always appreciated the fact that after I retired from teaching, Prin and I spent two or three weeks at a time in Washington with the Senator, and I painted a little bit his house, inside of the house, and we got to meet different people, and he was always very kind to us and very considerate to us and to all the family. And I understand he was also that way with a number of people from Maine who went to Washington to visit, and George was always good.<p><p>I think he's, he's always remembered, Andrea, where his roots were, as I showed you, and the upbringing and – not the struggle, because most people in those days were not wealthy people, but he got what most of us got and that was a love of the family and the community spirit that he got. And I'm

so thrilled now that he's given back to the state of Maine and to the country, like the Mitchell Institute, which is wonderful, where so many young people can go to college and get a break like that. I think that comes from his background, and I especially think it comes from the background of Bowdoin where he learned that people do care about you, even if you don't have a lot of money. And I think that's what drove him to do the Mitchell Institute, which I think is just an outstanding thing. <p><p>And of course we're so proud of him because of his efforts in [Northern] Ireland and other places in the world, where he's been and spent so many hours trying to make peace in the world and doing the right thing. So I think, Paul was the oldest, I thought I was the best, but George obviously has gone beyond both of us, he's crossed the finish line before we have, Andrea. <p><p>**AL:** Now living here in Waterville, Maine, do you get a lot of media attention for being George's brother? Or is it that Maine thing where people just sort of respect you and leave you alone pretty much?<p><p>**JM:** Most of the time we don't get a lot of attention, but if there's a special occasion and people are not familiar with Waterville and they – recently at our church, a fill-in priest, a retired monsignor, downstairs having coffee after, asked me if I was related to the great Mitchell. And I said, “Well I'm related to myself, are you talking about me or my brother?” But anyway, you get those kind of questions from, mostly from outsiders. And I always like to tell them that I'm not related to him, he's related to me, because Paul came first and I came second in the pecking order. So yes, we do, but the people in Waterville understand that and they don't, they don't bother us too much.<p><p>**AL:** Are there others in the community that we haven't talked about that you think would be good sources of information on Senator Mitchell, or do you think we covered most of them?<p><p>**JM:** Well, I think we've covered most of them. I think, Andrea, you'll get other names maybe from Paul.<p><p>**AL:** And Barbara, yes.<p><p>**JM:** And Barbara, from another end of it. Maybe when George was going to Bowdoin, they know more about his days at Bowdoin than I did because I was not around then. So I think maybe from them you will get maybe other names, like I have given you. I'm sure they can, I'm sure they will. They'll also mention Ruthie and Al, and they'll probably mention the Jabars, but there will be others too, I think.<p><p>**AL:** Now, do you have recollections of the foods, the traditional foods that you ate growing up? I think it's so interesting to talk about that, because food really brings families together.<p><p>**JM:** Well I, yeah, I can. My wife Prin should be able to say something, because you've always said, Prin, that George was a fussy eater when he was young.<p><p>**PM:** He was a very finicky eater, he was, like I mentioned. But over the years he's learned, you know, traveling, to eat many more foods than he did when he was young.<p><p>**JM:** But he's come back, he loves the Lebanese food.<p><p>**PM:** Oh yes, he certainly does.<p><p>**JM:** And some of those finicky little ways of his are passé now.<p><p>**PM:** Oh, onions, he wouldn't eat anything that had onions in it, and Lebanese food is not highly spiced but has onions. But now he eats it.<p><p>**JM:** Yeah, we'd have those Christmas dinners, or early in the Super Bowl days, when the Super Bowl was, way back when it first started, we'd meet at my father and mother's house and my mother would have plates of kibbeh and other nice delicacies, the Syrian food. And George would, George engaged in that, and we still, what we didn't know when we were growing up was that a lot of these foods are held in such high esteem now. We just thought, you know, only us, you know, so we didn't know lentils and like that were so good for you, and we've been eating them all our lives and we thought, oh boy, that baloney sandwich looks better, with the kid next door to us. But anyway we, we'd have all these, and thankfully my mother taught Janet, Robbie's wife, and Prin and Yvette how to make a lot of those Syrian foods.<p><p>**PM:** The Lebanese

food, she was an excellent cook – in her spare time, because she worked in the mill, like three to eleven, then get up early in the morning and go to Joseph’s market and buy fresh meats, vegetables, come home and cook before she went to work for a three o’clock shift till eleven. She was a wonderful cook. Beautiful family.<p><p>**AL:** And she passed down a lot of those foods to you?<p><p>**PM:** She did, yes, she did. She taught us how -<p><p>**JM:** She had no, I call them formulas, she had no, she used to do everything just by mix.<p><p>**PM:** A little dash of salt and this, but oh she (*unintelligible*).<p><p>**JM:** My mother was literate in Arabic, she could read and write Arabic, she was one of the few in the Waterville community because many of the older Lebanese ladies on Front Street, who were living there, would bring their letters over to her and she would read them to them, and then if they wanted to write back to a relative in Lebanon she’d write the letter for them, so she was very good like that.<p><p>And when they used to come and play cards in the house, and some, they’d make believe they couldn’t see it and they would, you know, make mistakes and the were arguing, so we grew up knowing all those different things. I’m not sure what George learned all those years, he probably was in the corner reading funny books or something.<p><p>**AL:** Now is, are there any other stories about George that you can think of at the moment?<p><p>**JM:** No, I – is that still on?<p><p>**AL:** It’s still on. Hold on, I’ll pause it.<p><p>(Taping paused)<p><p>**AL:** Well great, I just want to say thank you.<p><p>**JM:** Oh, you’re welcome, it’s been a pleasure. And we, we’re so proud of our brother George, and it’s been great meeting you, Andrea. I think you’re wonderful, too. Thank you very much.<p><p>**AL:** Thank you.<p><p>End of Interview<p>