

## ***George J. Mitchell Oral History Project***

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**Francis C. Marsano**  
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

**GMOH# 101**  
May 19, 2009

**Andrea L'Hommedieu:** This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College. The date is May 19, 2009, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Today I'm interviewing Francis Marsano, and Mr. Marsano, could you start by just giving me your full name and spelling it.

**Francis Marsano:** Francis, with an I, F-R-A-N-C-I-S, C, Marsano, M-A-R-S-A-N-O.

**AL:** And where and when were you born?

**FM:** I was born in Bangor, Maine on September 8, 1936.

**AL:** Is Bangor where you grew up?

**FM:** No, I was actually born in Bangor simply because there was a shortage of doctors and my mother needed to go there. I was a Belfast resident from like the third day of my life until we moved from Belfast, because of the Second World War, to Massachusetts.

**AL:** Now what was the cause for moving?

**FM:** The Second World War, my father had to go into defense work in order to avoid military service, he had two young children and accordingly could have obtained a deferral by working in a defense plant, so he went to work at Four River in Quincy, Mass.

**AL:** And what was his vocation otherwise?

**FM:** He was basically the son of a very successful Italian immigrant who came to Belfast in the 1870s and started a number of businesses there.

**AL:** And your mother, was she a homemaker or did she work outside the home as well?

**FM:** My mother was an exceptional lady. She came from a typical, I think, Maine background, in the sense that her father – her maiden name was Mannette – her father was a Canadian French person who married a woman by the name of Lavinia Warner, who was the great-great-great-great-granddaughter of a loyalist in the American Revolution. Their family obtained a King's Grant up on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, up just north of Halifax, and the

two met, married, and came to Portland. My mother was a nurse, she was a very, very well trained nurse, and did an incredible amount of work as both a mother, because she had five children, and as a community nurse, especially in the Second World War when there was an absence of doctors, and she finally became a public health nurse in Belfast.

**AL:** And what were your parents' names?

**FM:** My father's name was Alton L. Marsano, and my mother's name was Gertrude Mannette Marsano.

**AL:** And growing up in Belfast, you went during the Second World War to Massachusetts, and were you there for four years and then came back, or how did that - ?

**FM:** No, it did not work that way. In fact, that's one of the reasons I went to Bowdoin. But my grandfather retained his presence in Belfast. We went to Boston, Quincy, and my mother used to jokingly talk about how I would sit on the steps and say, "When are we going home?" And we would, on any occasion that we could, drive north to Belfast to see my grandfather, and we would always come through Brunswick, which at the time was a beautiful, small town in Maine, and I just fell in love with Bowdoin. And as the years passed, although I remained a student in high school, in grammar school and high school in Massachusetts, I always thought of and loved Bowdoin. And when I was a runner in high school we used to come up here and run the relays, and so many of my friends from the high school to which I went came here, that it was one of the seminal schools that I was attracted to.

**AL:** And what were your parents' feelings about education at that time? You had four siblings as well.

**FM:** Right. I was the second child. My sister became a nurse. My parents were always very interested in our getting educations; they believed strongly in education.

**AL:** And had they gone to four year colleges themselves?

**FM:** No, in fact my father didn't go to college at all, but my mother went to nursing school in Portland.

**AL:** So they had that sense of the next generation, they wanted to have you children educated.

**FM:** Yes.

**AL:** You talked about what led you to Bowdoin. How did that process work in terms of being admitted?

**FM:** Well, it was one of those things where I had done very well in high school in North Quincy and had a number of opportunities for school, but I came up here. The director of

admissions met with me when I was up here running and made it clear that I was going to be admitted, which of course just made me very, very happy. And he suggested that I would probably be on the scholarship list, and then I was given a state of Maine scholarship and once that happened I wanted to curtail all the other admissions because this was the place I wanted to go. It was like MacArthur said, how did he say it? “The culmination of all my boyhood hopes and dreams.” And it really was, I really loved Bowdoin.

**AL:** And so tell me about starting at Bowdoin.

**FM:** Well, I came to Bowdoin in the fall of 1954. The people who had preceded me here from my high school were all members of Beta Theta Pi over on McKean Street. I had a friend from Belfast who was a Sigma Nu, which was the same house that George was in, and I went over to Sigma Nu but I really wanted to become a Beta, and I did do that. And I was one of those people who got to school and loved everything about it; the challenges were great, we had wonderful courses, the professors were close to the students. I was at the Beta House, and of course the Beta House was – I say of course, you wouldn’t know it – but Professor Bill Whiteside and his wife lived just in back of the house, and he was my mentor, as it were, he was just an incredibly wonderful professor, who was actually the reason that I ended up going to the University of Michigan to law school. But he was there, all of these professors that I had, they cared about us, they instilled knowledge in an incredible way. It was just the perfect environment.

**AL:** Socially, what were the things to do at Bowdoin during those years?

**FM:** Well, I was a member of the track team, so a large part of my time was involved with that. The fraternity was a very interesting social kind of environment. When we dated ladies, we would date Colby ladies because they were pretty, we would date Westbrook ladies because they were close, and then if we wanted intelligent ladies, we went to Bates.

**AL:** And so that’s how you divided up your lady time.

**FM:** And money was tight. I was a scholarship student; I didn’t have any resources to speak of. I waited on tables all through college for what little spending money I would have. And I also was, as time passed, the person who took care of the old track, I watered the cage for Frank Sebastianski, when he was the track coach, and then I was also in ROTC and that also provided some things which I had to do.

**AL:** And do you have recollections of George Mitchell at that time?

**FM:** Well of course, he was not at Bowdoin when I was, he had already left.

**AL:** Right, he had just left the year that you came.

**FM:** Right. So during my college years I wouldn’t have seen him at all. If he came back, I

don't know that.

**AL:** Right.

**FM:** Actually, my first recollection of him is in 1964. It was a kind of unusual time. I had become enthralled with Barry Goldwater when I was in the southwest and I was the Republican county chairman for the Goldwater campaign in Belfast, but the interesting part of politics in Maine is that everybody is friendly. And what happened is that the national nominating convention for the Democrats that year was in Atlantic City, and Dave Walker, who had been a magnificent professor – oh, you knew David Walker.

**AL:** I know of him.

**FM:** Oh well, he was just wonderful. And he went to work for the campaign, for Muskie's campaign for the Senate, and George of course was there. And there was a problem with the Alabama delegation, and so they were trying to put together people to sit in the Alabama portion of the National Convention and not talk. And a friend of mine – who lived in Ocean City, New Jersey – and I were going to the convention, just because it was so close, we'd get a chance to see a convention. And Dave Walker knew we were there, so he put us into the chairs as Alabama delegates. And we got to see the way in which the Muskie campaign operated there, and George was there. I didn't get to meet him really there, but I did get to see him in action and you could see that he and Muskie were really close, and that continued of course to be the case.

And then, because I was then back practicing law, George also came back and practiced with Mert Henry's firm. And I got to meet George there in especially one case that is very memorable to me, because it was a case when I realized what a great lawyer he was. It was a death case that had involved a life insurance policy and he was representing the company, and -

**AL:** And were you on the other side?

**FM:** Yeah, I was representing the widow. And it was a case the actual nature of which I can't even really remember, it was all that long ago, but George's handling of that case was superb, it was just exactly what you think of a great lawyer as doing; all of the kinds of political skills that he had were obvious in that, and he was very pleasant to deal with, very easy to talk to. Of course we had the Bowdoin connection, which is something that was of incredible importance in Maine at the time when I came back to practice law.

So that was my first real dealing with him. And then as time passed, I didn't have all that many interrelationships with him, except that whenever we would meet we would know each other because of that case and the Bowdoin connection and the fact that we were both Maine lawyers, whatever else we were doing, wherever we were, in politics or otherwise.

**AL:** Right, right. Well, one follow-up question to the courtroom experience that you had with him, what were the characteristics that you observed that were, was it his oratorical skills, or

preparation, or - ?

**FM:** I didn't see him in operation in the courtroom. The case that I had with him did not involve actual in-courtroom litigation; it was a case that we resolved. And what I remember most was the great smile, easygoing nature, totally in command of all of the critical issues but willing to yield in a way which would bring resolution. And that's what happened.

**AL:** Great. Now, you've talked about having some political life throughout your legal career. Do you have a sense of when you began to be interested in politics, did it come from childhood and your family, or was it later on?

**FM:** Well, I had majored in American political history here with Bill Whiteside. LeRoy Greason [who served Bowdoin College as an English literature professor, dean, and later its twelfth president] used to refer to me as a wistful Jeffersonian agrarianist, and probably that was true, and I just wandered back and forth across the political spectrum. As I said, [I] became enthralled with Barry Goldwater's presence in the southwest when I was out there – that was before he was eradicated by the northeast intellectual Republican Party. But there were ideas that were - It was a time of transition. John Kennedy, I voted for him in 1960, but then the idea of a conservative liberal kind of government made a lot of sense to me; that's why I got involved with that, so I got involved with that portion of the Republican Party.

I got out of the service, as it turned out, it was the day that President Kennedy was assassinated, and I came back to start my career finally in Maine, although I had been admitted to practice two years before and had practiced a little bit, I came back to start my practice. And my partner, subsequently he became my partner, Dick Glass, was the senator from Waldo County, he was in state politics, and I was running campaigns. I was involved in every political campaign that took place from the time I got back in 1963 until I became a judge in 1992, and did everything. I worked very, very closely with John McKernan, "Jock" McKernan, in many of the campaigns when he was running campaigns for others. Then when he became a candidate I became his county chair and worked for him in Waldo County.

**AL:** What about the 1982 campaign when George Mitchell was trying to win election in his own right against Dave Emery, do you have, were you involved at all?

**FM:** Dave Emery. For governor you mean?

**AL:** For Senate.

**FM:** No, no, for Senate. Well yeah, I would have been in the Emery camp, simply because of the way in which politics was structured. I don't think anybody ever really thought Dave Emery was going to win. It was sort of like how George didn't win against Longley, I mean nobody could really believe that. George was the only one that was talking about "There was a problem, there was a problem." He could see what others couldn't. But that turned out, I think, to be a blessing in disguise.

The Maine political process, and Dave Emery's campaign is probably a good example of it, is that Dave was 1st District person, George was 2nd District. The 1st District in Maine is a three-point race, you know, if you win a landslide as either a Republican or a Democrat in the 1st District, you win by three points. The election takes place in the 2nd District, and George obviously had the Waterville position, he was really strong in Waterville. But Dave had some presence in the coast, but that, the coast was split between one and two, as far legislative districts were concerned.

George ran really well in the 2nd District, he was extremely popular in that whole Auburn, Waterville [area]. If you look at what's happened in our political elections since, you'll see the same thing. Jock McKernan was a congressman from the 1st District, but he was a Bangor boy. Olympia Snowe had the same kind of connection in Lewiston-Auburn that George had in Waterville and Lewiston-Auburn. Those three cities pretty much go together. That is politics in Maine, so it's interesting that you mention that. George's background as somebody who gave up the bench would of course have been very compelling to lots of people who saw that he realized that there were other things that he wanted to do and could do, besides be a federal district court judge.

**AL:** And what was your take on that, by the way, having been a judge yourself?

**FM:** Great respect. I think that George, I think that there was little that he could do except take the appointment to the federal bench, but what happened afterwards was, he was in the right place at the right time and was quick enough to accept the opportunities that presented themselves; while realizing while the federal bench is a very necessary place to have competent people, it wasn't where he wanted to be. And I thought it worked out beautifully for him, and it sort of enhanced his stature as a candidate, I think.

**AL:** You were talking about being involved in Maine politics for almost thirty years actively, between '63 and '92. How did you see Maine politics changing over that time? Were there changes that were obvious, or what were some of the major -?

**FM:** One of the most interesting of the changes that I saw, and I can't tell you who the Republican candidate for governor was, but we were collecting at the president's house here at Bowdoin when the Republican candidate [Willis A Trafton, Jr.] was here, and he was running against Muskie, and he made it clear that Muskie didn't have a chance to win the governor's job, that Maine was a Republican state, blah-blah-blah. And he failed miserably. I mean Muskie carried the state.

**AL:** In '54?

**FM:** No, it would have been later than that.

**AL:** Or '56, the reelection, yeah.

**FM:** Probably '56, because it was when I wasn't first here, it was after I'd been here a while and I can't remember the Republican candidate's name. He had, I think, also been governor. But yeah, Muskie won reelection, and that was the real tidal change. And then of course things began to change increasingly, and the Goldwater election really destroyed the Republican Party in the Maine legislature. There were like, I think, four senators that were left – my partner happened to be one of them. The Senate was completely Democratic, the House went Democratic, and then of course John Martin's presence became increasingly important and significant in terms of the Democratic movement towards majority control. We had Harry Richardson, who was a really great politician, a guy I worked with a lot on campaigns, worked especially on his gubernatorial campaign, and it just didn't work any more.

Maine had suddenly swung into the Democratic camp, and it's been there pretty much since. I mean we had a chance, because Jock McKernan was the only Republican governor we've had in fifty years, and that was the reason that I ran for the State House, for the state legislature, was because the seat in my district gave me an opportunity to go over there and I made no bones about the fact that I was going to be a McKernan voice in the House; if he wanted something said, I'd say it. And I did. I thought he was, and still do think he's one of the most brilliant people I've ever met. But that was what Maine politics was like, and there was that break and I was fortunate enough to be a part of it.

And then of course we have all of these Senate campaigns which are so interesting in the way in which the individual rather than the party has a tendency to control. If you take a look at Olympia Snowe today, you see a great Maine politician who is a Republican but is a senator because the people of Maine respect what she is. Well that's the way they all were. I mean, we had, Bill Cohen and George Mitchell; of course they were both Bowdoin lawyers, so I was particularly happy with that, but you would never see them have difficulty with each other. They were capable of and actually did collaborate on many, many significant issues.

**AL:** Iran-Contra, for one.

**FM:** Yeah, that's of course one of the things that was at the background of the award presentation we made to George and to Bill when I was president of the State Bar Association.

**AL:** Yeah, can you talk about that a little bit? What, the award, was – did the award exist before you were there, or did you create the award?

**FM:** We created it, and we created it especially for the two of them. When I went to the Maine legislature, I was the only Republican lawyer in it.

**AL:** And what year was that?

**FM:** Nineteen eighty-six, the same year that Jock became governor. I was also president-elect of the Maine State Bar Association, and I wanted to make lawyers aware of the fact that we

needed a lawyer presence and that lawyers in politics were good for Maine. George [Mitchell] and Bill Cohen were two perfect examples of that, as was Jock McKernan, and I just wanted to do everything I could – we only had six Democratic lawyers in the legislature when I was there, and my point was and I used to make it on any occasion that I had an opportunity to do so, was that many of the wonderful people who serve in the state legislature don't know how the court system works, and they don't know what really goes on with respect to the law. Lawyers can provide that to them, and so that's what I was attempting to do.

The Iran-Contra scandal, thing, was a political issue. You have to understand that if you are in the middle of a debate in the state legislature about how much money is going to be paid to your school district, how much road money is going to be paid to your area, what the budget is going to look like, the fact that there are politicians in Washington who are working on internationally complex and important issues is marginally relevant to your day after day work, I mean.

**AL:** Right.

**FM:** And the long sleepless nights, you know, we had to accomplish things here in Maine. We were dealing with an income tax problem that Jock worked so hard to solve. We had a workers compensation problem that was destructive, that Jock was finally able to help resolve as well. And, nobody at the kind of level that I was at would ever think negatively at all about what our representatives were doing or trying to do – if you noticed the, I don't know that you saw, but we had Joe Brennan as a speaker, he was the congressman at the time, at the same ceremony, same session that we had George and Bill Cohen at, because we knew how good our elected representatives were.

**AL:** Now, [cough] excuse me, I ask this in a broad sense; what are your overall impressions and recollections of George Mitchell over the years?

**JM:** It's hard to think in terms of overall, when there were so many wonderful impressions, especially the fact that he came to the Bar Association meeting; that was helpful to me. I was president, I wanted to make the presentation, we were all grateful to him, it was just wonderful that he came. And if you're running something, your first priority is to get the person there, the rest of it takes care of itself. Everybody was happy to see George, I was especially glad that he was there.

Then that night that I explained to you, where he had us in when we were at the National Leadership Conference in Washington [I was the state House Republican whip] and he took us to the majority office, is probably one of the most special, singularized events of my life. And he was the perfect George Mitchell that night; it was incredible to see the activity that he was surrounded by when we got there. The Senate was in session, the people were coming back and forth to George, talking with him, and he would know everything that he needed to know about each particular issue. The way he managed things was incredible. And then all of a sudden, we were insulated. We were taken into the inner chamber and George was with us, and we had this wonderful meeting – probably lasted only a half an hour – but it was just his way of thanking us

for doing in Maine what we had thanked him for doing on a national scale.

And his, overall presence was always superb. I mean nobody, I think, has ever denigrated him in any way. He did the right thing with respect to the political contributions, the way in which he created the scholarship funds, the way in which he treats Maine people, because Maine people are still special to him. And I think you would find that Bowdoin lawyers are even more special as parts of the people of Maine, if they are Maine people.

And I just think he has a well-deserved reputation as a great American. And if you look at the roots that he had, the way in which he came from a very modest beginning in a mill town in central Maine to a great school like Bowdoin and then to the kind of career that he had, and if you look at the ups and downs in the way that he handled them, losing the election to Longley, yet never having it bother him. He worked for great law firms, especially Mert Henry's law firm. I don't know if you've met Mert in this thing, but you probably would if you haven't. And the kind of relationship that he had with everybody was just great, it was always easy to see him, he was just an easy person to be with, and he did, and is doing, wonderful things for our country.

**AL:** Is there anything else that I haven't asked you that you think is important to add, that I may have missed in my questions?

**FM:** I can't think of anything. I think we've covered it pretty well. I just think it's wonderful that Bowdoin's doing this, to him, because he is what Bowdoin should always be doing.

**AL:** Thank you very much.

**FM:** Okay.

End of Interview