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Interview with Don Nicoll by Henry Sirgo

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Nicoll, Don

Interviewer

Sirgo, Henry

Date

July 7, 1998

Place

Portland, Maine

ID Number

MOH 103

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Biographical Note

Donald Eugene "Don" Nicoll was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on August 4, 1927, and grew up in the West Roxbury section of the city. He is the son of George and Mary Nicoll. He attended Robert Gould Shaw Junior High School and Boston English High School and graduated from Colby College in Waterville, Maine in 1949, majoring in History with a minor in Government. Don met his future wife, Hilda Farnum, also a Colby student, when they worked in the resort town of Ocean Park, Maine, in the summer of 1944. Nicoll began his graduate work at Pennsylvania State College in 1949, where he received a teaching fellowship in the Department of History. His graduate studies concentrated on American history, specifically the period from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War .. His M.A. (1952) thesis was on the Alien and Sedition Acts.

Starting in 1951, Nicoll and his family settled in Buckfield, Maine where he picked apples and taught part time at Stephen's High School, located in Rumford. Nicoll began working as an announcer for WLAM radio in Lewiston, Maine. He became a reporter and then news editor for WLAM and WLAM-TV. In June 1954, Nicoll left WLAM to become Executive Secretary of the Democratic State Committee at the request of Frank M. Coffin, who has just become chairman. Mr. Coffin was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from Maine's Second Congressional District in 1956 and Nicoll went to Washington, DC, as his administrative assistant, continuing in that post until December 1960, the end of Congressman Coffin's second term. Mr. Coffin ran

for governor in 1960 and was defeated. After the election Senator Edmund S. Muskie asked Nicoll to join his staff as legislative assistant and news secretary. Nicoll served in that position until 1962, when he became administrative assistant. He continued in that post until 1971, when he became personal advisor to Senator Muskie. He left the senate office in mid-1972.

From 1972 until his retirement in 2005 Nicoll worked as a program and policy planner, first as a consultant (1972-73), then as chairman and chief executive officer of the New England Land Grant Universities Joint Operations Committee (1973-1975), then as coordinator of planning and vice president for planning and public affairs for the Maine Medical Center (1975-1986), then as a consultant (1986-2005). His clients were primarily in the non-profit sector and included, universities, libraries, education associations, health care organizations and social service agencies. He also worked as a volunteer, heading a variety of public policy projects, including the Maine Task Force on Government Reorganization, the Maine State Compensation Commission, the Maine (Mental Health) Systems Assessment Commission, the Maine Consortium for Health Professions Education, the Southern Maine Community Television Consortium, the Maine Special Commission on Government Reorganization (co-chair), the Board of Visitors of the University of Southern Maine's Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, the Maine-Aomori Sister-State Advisory Council and the Governor's Allagash Wilderness Waterway Working Group.

From 1998-2005, Don Nicoll was the Director of the Edmund S. Muskie Oral History Project at Bates College.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: environmental legislation; Stewart Udall; Clean Air; Clean Water; formation of the Muskie Archives; Muskie Oral History Project; Public Works Committee during its early days; Allagash Waterway; Intergovernmental Relations; and Muskie's ability to work with diverse groups.

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Henry B. Sirgo: . . . interview. I'm preparing a paper for presentation to the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association which will be held in two months in Boston. And I've got . . . a title, which I guess (*unintelligible phrase*) some things I'm interested in: "Senator Edmund S. Muskie and Environmental Policy Formulation and Incubation in the U.S. Senate." And I'm also working on a related book project which is tentatively entitled "The Brothers Udall: Institutionalizing Environmentalism" which is So I'm interested in how, oh, the, well, interviewing Stewart Udall, you know, former Secretary of the Interior. He indicated that Muskie was the single most important public office holder in terms of making the environment a permanent part of the political agenda, which it certainly has been for at least a couple of decades now. So, I want to get a little background on Senator and former Secretary of State Edmund Muskie and your, how you worked with him and in particular policy areas. So, when did you meet Edmund S. Muskie?

DN: I met him first in 1953 when I was a television and radio reporter in Maine. And part of my work involved covering the State House. It was a radio and television station in Lewiston, Maine and I used to go weekly to Augusta to cover the State House, cover the governor's press conference and other events. And the fall of '53 one of the Democratic leaders arranged for a press conference in reverse, and the State House reporters were the individuals who were to respond to questions from Democratic Party leaders. And one of the Democratic Party leaders happened to be in session with Ed Muskie, so that was the first time I met him.

HS: Was that the first broadcast station in the state of Maine at the time?

DN: No. We, we were one of a number of radio stations. The television station was a UHF, it was one of the first television stations in the state, and it lasted only for a few years as a UHF. The VHF stations took over. And I was there, well I'd been working at the station since '51 and I left in early '54 when I went to work for the Democratic Party as executive secretary.

HS: I got the impression a couple years ago, I think it was either 1994 or 1996 when I was reading I believe it was Senator Muskie's oral history at the Kennedy Library, I got the impression he was actually quite good with using television, or somewhat of a pioneer as a politician effectively using the television medium.

DN: Extraordinarily effective. And 1954 was the first year in Maine when television was used to campaign. At that time, all television was virtually live. It was black and white and it was live. And with no prior experience really, he was able to make use of the medium and use it extraordinarily effectively.

HS: How did you come to- I was going to ask what your position was, but that's clear. How did you come to head the Muskie Oral History project?

DN: Well, I'm one of the last of the old-timers around, and that's part of it. The other piece is that I had worked with Dean Carignan at Bates, who is ultimately responsible for the Muskie Archives. He oversees the archives through Chris Beam, the director. And he and I served together on the Board of Visitors with the Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine. And we talked about the importance of doing an oral history, and with the Muskie Foundation were able to raise sufficient funds to get it underway.

HS: In an interview with me in July of 1997, former Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall said that in the area of clean air and water policy that, quote, "the real initiator was Senator Muskie". Why did Senator Muskie decide to champion the environmental platform?

DN: Well, he had a long-standing interest in environmental protection. He had grown up in a Maine paper mill town and was quite familiar with the adverse effects of industry on air and water. And his father [Stephen Muskie], who had come to this country from Poland, had a strong feeling for the natural beauties of the area, and I think imbued Ed Muskie with a love for the out-of-doors, for the natural environment from the time he was a little boy. And that interest persisted through his governorship and going into the Senate.

The question in some ways was not whether he had an interest or not, but whether he would have an opportunity to exercise that interest. When he went to the Senate, his committee assignments turned out to be unfavorable because he crossed Lyndon Johnson. And Johnson consigned him to the Government Operations Committee that was dominated by John McClellan¹ of Arkansas, the Public Works Committee that was dominated by Robert Kerr² of Oklahoma; the chair of that committee was Dennis Chavez³ of New Mexico, but Kerr was the real power in the committee. And the third committee was Banking and Currency, which was chaired at that time by Senator

¹ John Little McClellan, born February 25, 1896 - died November 28, 1977. Senator from Arkansas 1943-1977. Served on the Government Operations Committee from 1956-1972.

² Robert Samuel Kerr, born September 11, 1896 - January 1, 1963. Senator from Oklahoma 1949 - 1963.

³ Dennis Chavez, born April 8, 1888 - died November 18, 1962. Senator of New Mexico, 1935-1962.

John Sparkman⁴ of Alabama. And none of those committees in those days was considered a prime assignment. And Public Works, in particular, was principally devoted to protection of the interests of the southwestern states; rivers and harbors and water projects in the west and southwest. And that, that meant not much opportunity and not much interest from the leadership in doing anything about the environment.

Well in 1963, as I recall, the dates within a couple of weeks of each other, Dennis Chavez and Robert Kerr died, and the Senate Public Works Committee was no longer the province of Kerr and company. The new chair of the committee was Senator Pat McNamara of Michigan, who was a liberal northern Democrat who had a concern for the environment. And he knew of Ed Muskie's concerns. He called Senator Muskie and said "I want to create a subcommittee on air and water pollution, and I want you to chair it." And the only constraint was that he would not get any money for staff. Pat was a liberal on legislative matters, but a tightwad when it came to running the committee. So he said, "You can have the services of the chief clerk of the committee, Ron Linton. And you and the ranking Republican, Senator Caleb Boggs of Delaware, will have to figure out how you're going to provide additional staff."

The net effect of this was that Ron Linton served as the chief staff member, and Bill Hildenbrand, who later became secretary of the Senate, was then legislative assistant to Senator Boggs, and I as Senator Muskie's administrative assistant, we were the triumvirate, if you will, staff for the early days of the committee.

HS: How long had you been his administrative assistant? Since '59 or earlier?

DN: No, I had worked from 1954 in the first gubernatorial campaign as executive secretary to the Democratic State Committee. And Frank Coffin, C-O-F-F-I-N was the chairman starting in '54, and I worked through the '54 gubernatorial campaign and the reelection campaign of '56. That '56 campaign was the year in which Frank ran for Congress, was elected in Maine's second district. And I went to Washington with him as his administrative assistant, was with him for two terms, including the '59-'60 term when Senator Muskie had arrived in Washington as senator from Maine. And in 1960 Frank ran for governor and was defeated in the anti-Kennedy vote in Maine, and after that election Senator Muskie asked me to join his staff. I started in January of '61 as his legislative assistant and news secretary; I wore two hats. And then in 1961, the end of 1961 his administrative assistant then, John Donovan, moved from his office to work for Willard Wirtz, the Secretary of Labor as a senior official from then on. And at that point Senator asked me to, Senator Muskie asked me to become his administrative assistant.

HS: What was the, the main source of the anti-Kennedy vote in Maine in 1961?

DN: Anti-Catholic.

HS: Anti-Catholic policy? And the, because he had a pretty good relationship with Senator Kennedy didn't he, I mean like going back to at least, at least to, say, 1954 or something like

⁴ John Jackson Sparkman, born December 20, 1899 - died November 16, 1985. Senator from Alabama 1946 - 1979.

that?

DN: Oh yes.

HS: How did Senator Muskie come to author, (I think I'll put this in sequence, it's kind of together), how did he come to author the Clean Air Act of 1963 and relatedly, (this struck me from my reading and I'm curious here), why was he always considered such an approachable figure by individuals who varied widely in their views on the degree of rigor which was needed, which should be applied to deal with matters such as air and water pollution? And, so, well I guess go back to the first -- how did he come to author that 1963, the Clean Air Act of 1963?

DN: Well, the first order of business in many respects was air pollution, which was becoming a significant problem, particularly in California in the Los Angeles basin. And there were also concerns in the industrial communities in large cities in the east. And the government, the federal government, really wasn't fully set up to deal with air pollution at the time. And so that, that was a major public concern, and we took that on. It's as simple as that. The problem was there, and the time had come to cope with it.

HS: When President Eisenhower vetoed the, there was water pollution legislation he vetoed in 1960. How close did the Democrats come to overriding that, or (*unintelligible phrase*)?

DN: I'm sorry. I can't answer that. I don't remember.

HS: What was executive assistant George J. Mitchell's involvement in the, in, say the formula-, if any, in the formulation of the Clean Air Act of 1963, and did he play any role in other legislation such as the Water Quality Act of 1965?

DN: No. George, I'm trying to remember the exact date when George came to work for us. It was later in '63 I believe, that is after the subcommittee was established, and in those days we divided up the legislative work. I took on certain committees, and George took on others as executive assistant. And the air and water pollution was not an area where he did much work.

HS: I notice that, or, again, certainly (*unintelligible*), that Senator Muskie had cooperation from Conservative Senator James Buckley for proposals such as fifty thousand-mile warranties for pollution control equipment required by, by law. But it seems like only a few years after that, or maybe almost at the same time, there were Republican senators such as Helms and Thurmond⁵, and representative Broyhill⁶, in the House wanting to relax emission control requirements and President Ford wanted to put a moratorium on further emission reduction requirements, starting at the time of the energy crisis, and so forth. How did, so, you know, had there been any kind of change in terms of, say, partisanship on the environment or ideological orientation? And also, (I

⁵ James Strom Thurmond, born December 5, 1902. Senator of South Carolina from 1954-to present (1999). In 1964 switched from the Democratic Party to become a Republican. Democratic Governor of S.C. in 1948 when he ran as the States Rights Party's nominee for the presidency unsuccessfully.

⁶ Joel Thomas Broyhill, born November 4, 1919. Republican Representative from Virginia, 1953-1974.

guess in a little while we'll get back to this), how did Senator Muskie cope with the threat posed to environmental progress by the first and second energy crises?

DN: Well, the, I think it's fair to say from the earliest days of the 1960-61 legislative efforts to deal with pollution problems, air and water, the divisions between those who wanted to take vigorous action to control pollution and those who wanted either to be softer on companies, particularly in the early days, or wanted to relax existing controls. Those lines weren't drawn on party lines. They were principally drawn along the economic and social philosophies of individual members and constituencies. That is, members who were from districts with strong industrial bases or resource extraction bases, for example coal or oil, would tend to be much, much more, quote, "conservative" of, than people from rural areas or receiving areas in terms of pollution. Not an absolute, but that tended to be the case. And some of the strongest advocates for pollution control were Republican (*unintelligible phrase*) as well as Democrat. And Ed Muskie had a capacity to engage people in first defining what the real issues were and then figuring out ways to solve the problems, spelled out. And I, I was not around for the struggles with Senator, with President Ford, so I can't really comment on the details of that. The person with the best knowledge of that would be Leon Billings.

HS: What was Senator Muskie's relationship with Secretary of the Interior, Stewart L. Udall, and relatedly, how helpful in the formulation of environmental policy was the fact that Udall served eight years?

DN: They had a very good working relationship. And it showed up in the work that was done particularly on water pollution control and on the, work on the Allagash wilderness waterway in Maine, which really was made possible by an agreement between Senator Muskie and Senator Udall. This was an important conservation effort for the state of Maine. But they, they knew each other, liked each other, had very similar views and pragmatic approaches to solving these problems. And I think that that, that made it possible to develop the legislation with minimum friction and with virtually no concern about who was going to get the credit; it was just some natural agency of the government.

HS: What was the senator's involvement in the formation of the Land and Water Conservation Fund?

DN: I don't recall anything specific about the development of that fund. What I remember most is the fact that we were able to tap into that fund for the Allagash Waterway as a matching grant from the federal government. And I remember them being supportive, but I'd have to go back and read the files to refresh my memory on what we did do.

HS: Did, did he, did he do any work, (and this might, well, from what . . . said earlier, he may just . . .) did he have much involvement with the development of the origins of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge?

DN: No. These, those, those issues were really under the jurisdiction of different committees, and the leadership roles tended to fall to people who were on those committees, and particularly chairing the subcommittees that had direct jurisdiction.

HS: How did Senator and Secretary of State Muskie's foreign policy involvement complement his environmental policy interests? Such as having you prepare for the Stockholm conference in 1972.

DN: Again, you'd have to talk to Leon Billings because I wasn't involved in the . . . I think from, the one experience that is instructive, during the 1960s the Roosevelt Campobello International Park was formed in part from the urging of Senator Muskie. And from time to time there were issues that arose related to the park involving pollution control and environmental protection. And one was particularly the proposal to build an oil refinery and terminal in the city of Eastport, Maine, which is on the eastern end of the state and directly across from Campobello Island. And in the course of struggling with the issues related to the proposed oil refinery, I remember him making the point that we had to be concerned not only about the environmental effects within the country, but in other countries, too, which speaks of Canada. So I don't think he ever made a distinction between environmental issues affecting the United States and those affecting other countries.

HS: Did you have any dealings with this preparation for his Earth Day speech in 1970?

DN: No. That was principally, I was involved in the sense that I had general responsibility for the office, but most of the work on that was done by other staff members.

HS: This, this might be a bit extraneous but I thought I might just ask about it. How did he find out about the FBI surveillance of his speech on Earth Day? I came across that in the files and I was searching Hale Boggs⁷ papers, a couple of, around Easter time and he had dug C oh, Hale Boggs, who was very critical of some of Hoover's activities.

DN: I forget how that, how that came into play.

HS: Did his, Edmund Muskie's service as governor of Maine influence his interest in and appreciation of the complexities of intergovernmental relations?

DN: Oh, absolutely. He, he had a sense of the, obviously in terms of the relationships between the state and local government, and that was a plus in the '50s dealing with federal rules, regulations that affected the states. And when he went to Washington and was serving on the Government Operations Committee, that gave him direct exposure to a number of those issues, and his gubernatorial and legislative experience in Maine (*unintelligible phrase*).

HS: How was his work with Vice President Nelson Rockefeller and U.S. Representative Jim Wright when he served as vice chairman of the National Water Quality Commission?

⁷ Thomas Hale Boggs, Sr., born February 15, 1914 in Mississippi. A Democratic representative from Louisiana from January 3, 1947 to January 3, 1973, when he was presumed dead after disappearing in an airplane in Alaska in October of 1972.

DN: I don't have any direct knowledge of that. That's, that's, I was not involved with the staff work on that. I know that he and Jim Wright had a good working relationship before then. Jim was very supportive, very, in the late sixties and early seventies. But Muskie, Muskie had an extraordinary talent of bringing people together and getting them to work civilly together.

HS: How long did he work with the Environmental Law Institute? I saw it in the . . . Environmental Law Institute. He was recognized for his efforts.

DN: I'm not, I don't recall. Leon would be the, Leon Billings would be the one that could give you more detail on that. But I don't recall much direct involvement with the Law Institute.

HS: Well, gee, I think we covered most of it, I really appreciate it, Don. (*Unintelligible phrase*).

DN: Well, one question you asked and we didn't, we sort of dropped, was how he worked with people of different backgrounds.

HS: Yeah.

DN: And that I think was very important and was illustrated from the very beginning with the Subcommittee on Air and Water Pollution, where he'd have members representing very different perspectives. I recall particularly the members of that subcommittee, included among others, Caleb Boggs⁸ of Delaware, where the principal corporation was Dupont, and involved George Murphy⁹ of California, who was a fairly conservative Republican. And it involved Jennings Randolph¹⁰ of West Virginia, who was from a coal mining state. And each of those individuals had constituencies that were directly and sometimes adversely affected by any attempt to control either air or water pollution.

And from the beginning, that subcommittee worked extraordinarily effectively because every member of the committee, of the subcommittee, was given an opportunity to participate regardless of their point of view, and have full expression of their perspectives, with Ed Muskie pushing them very hard in terms of facts and in terms of coming to an agreement on what the problems were, and understanding what the options were for legislation. And the doors were never closed, not to members of the committee, or to the outside. And this proved a, quite an experience for environmental protection. And it was a combination of his style of encouraging debate and rigorous intellectual honesty and pushing members of the committee and members of the staff to be as clear about what they were doing and why, that really made it possible to bring people together. When there was a disagreement, they tried to thrash it out and tried to reach an

⁸ James Caleb Boggs, born May 15, 1909. Republican Senator from Delaware, 1961-1973.

⁹ George Lloyd Murphy, born July 4, 1902. Republican Senator from California, 1965-1971.

¹⁰ Jennings Randolph, Born March 8, 1902. Senator of West Virginia from November 5, 1958 to January 3, 1985. Chairman of the Committee on Public Works (89th through 95th congresses), and on the Committee on Environment and Public Works (95th and 96th congresses).

agreement. Where they couldn't, they would respectfully disagree, voted, and went on. But people came out of whatever the encounter and whatever the decision feeling good about themselves and feeling good about the work. That makes a big difference in . . . being able to get people with very different points of view

HS: Well, it certainly seems like a good preparation for his later services as Secretary of State. Speaking of that position, did you have any dealings with Madeleine Albright while she was on his staff?

DN: I had limited, she came to the staff late, but I knew her earlier as a volunteer in campaigns. And she was raising funds for the senator and was a, she was a very good friend of one of the lead staff people and.

HS: How many staff members did you have?

DN: Oh I think in the beginning, back in 1961 and for the next couple of years we had as I recall about thirteen. And it had grown into the twenties by the end of the decade. I have no idea what it is today.

HS: Yes, yeah, MaNamara, Senator McNamara, you were talking about, he sought to keep a staff, we'll say reas-, I'll say reasonable size. And he certainly was ahead of his time (*unintelligible phrase*), I suppose both political and academic circles it's pretty much of a view that staffs are, nowadays, too large, or at least in more recent years they've been kind of large.

DN: Yeah, I think they're much too large. And I think after a point you, you try to justify the size of the staff you've got and you're looking for justification for the staff and probably getting into areas that you shouldn't get into or in ways that are not very productive or important, or directed more at self-justification than they are at accomplishment. We didn't have much time to fuss with self-justification then, we got the job done.

HS: Yeah, yeah, there's this, [Michael] Malbin, he wrote a, he wrote a book on staff and about Senator Muskie. He basically makes the (*unintelligible phrase*) that Muskie got very interested in things such as budget reform and so forth; this idea that, uh, he didn't want it to become unmanageable. He actually did want to be able to achieve goals.

DN: That was, in any of the legislative areas where he was involved, the emphasis was on, I mean there were a bunch of goals and accomplishing them, whether we were talking about environmental protection or intergovernmental relations or the budget, or housing and urban development, model cities, and not, it wasn't about exploiting issues for political purposes. Makes a difference.

HS: What issue was the . . . If I use the term A(*unintelligible*)", but what was the issue he had looked at . . . (*unintelligible*) for the longest period of time and that, maybe, . . . (*unintelligible*) he eventually, he got to the point where it was doable?

DN: Well, the environmental protection legislation was probably the longest lasting. It started

in '63, continued through the '70 act and it was constantly evolving during that period. His prominent urban legislative involvement was second longest. With legislation related to intergovernmental relations, that was nowhere near as dramatic ended that year. . . . And the other arenas, the budget was not that long an involvement and the urban policy legislation, the housing legislation tended to be episodic. And there wasn't the continuity connected with that, with the obvious continuity that you had with air and water pollution.

HS: You mentioned technical things. Did he play a major role in the formation of the Office of Technology Assessment?

DN: I don't think, not in the formation of that office. But there was an interest in it and as I recall we were making some kind of legislative contributions to the discussion and the debate, but I don't recall anything that you can attribute to us in terms of

HS: Well, thank, thank you very much. I appreciate it.

DN: Good luck on both the article and, or I guess it's a paper.

HS: Well, it's a, yeah paper. I'm going to, the first thing is a paper, and then hopefully it'll go over to a book project. Well it is a book project. Inevitably it'll be published by University Press, in Florida, or some other university press.

End of Interview