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Oral Interview of Marshall Cohen by Ann Schonberger and Mary MacPherson for the Feminist Oral History Project

Ann Schonberger

Mary MacPherson

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Oral Interviews for the Feminist Oral History Project.

Interviewer: Ann Schonberger (AS), Mary MacPherson (MM)

Interviewee: Marshall Cohen (MC)

Date: 11/06/1994

Recording number: MF223-CohenM-T1a

Length of recording: 43:54

[Start of transcript]

MC: OK, well I thought about talking louder, but that would probably mess up your system. So I'm just going to speak at the same volume that I've been speaking before.

AS: Would be good because I never seem to have time to call during the times, I think someone will be there.

MC: Yeah, thank you, thank you for that.

MM: I think the general plan is that I'm going to interrogate you, but first Ann has a little full disclosure statement to make here.

AS: I do, we have this printed release form that I'll send you in the mail, but I, I'll just read it to you so you will know what's going to happen to the tapes after we get through with them. It says here in consideration of the work the Northeast archives of Folklore and oral history is doing to preserve and collect material of value for studies in ways of life, past and present in the New England maritime area. I would like to deposit with them for their use the items represented by the accession number given below. This tape are tapes and the accompanying transcripts are the results of one or more recorded voluntary interviews with me. Any readers should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of my spoken, not written word, and that the tape, and not the transcript, is the primary document. It is understood that the Northeast Archives will, at the discretion of the director, allow qualified scholars to listen to the tapes and read the transcript and use them in connection with their research or for other educational purposes of the university. It is further understood that no copies of the tapes or transcripts will be made and nothing may be used from them in any published form without my written permission until and then you can fill in the blank. After which time the director's written permission will be required and that it's assigned to, you know Marshall Cohen, et cetera, and with our names as interviewers, OK.

MC: OK.

AS: Well Mary will begin then. And all the further questions will probably be from Mary.

MM: Oh, you can jump in anytime.

AS: I will, but that was for the purpose of the transcriber. And I should say that this is Anne Schoenberger and Mary McPherson interviewing Marshall Cohen, who is at his home in suburban Virginia. On November 6th, 1994. OK, Mary.

MM: First of all I have this transcript of an oral history that was done well prior to Nancy's death, but probably somewhere in the early 80s, and I just wanted to read you this portion of what Nancy said when she started talking about the bill. I learned about everything I knew about lobbying from Marshall Cohen. Marshall he had an ability, I just think he had this understanding of what the issues were. I mean, he really understood the issues and he was caring and he knew when to step aside and say I'm not the spokesperson this woman is the expert, not me. I mean he had, he was our good lobbyist and so he had that information to offer us in the technical assistance to offer us at that time we needed someone like Marshall who was just there. So Marshall, how did you get involved in Spruce Run?

MC: Well, what I remember is in 1977, that I had sort of been doing a statewide tour of the Pine Tree Legal Assistance Offices to...

AS: Just a minute, I'm worried that something isn't working here. Just wait just a minute. I've got a replay to make sure the needle isn't jumping when it should be, and I just checked it out within us a few minutes ago. Just a minute.... Mary, do you want to ask the question again?

MM: How do you get involved with Spruce Run?

MC: OK, my recollection is that in 1977 when we opened sort of a full-time legislative office for Pine Tree Legal Assistance. I did a tour around the state of pine tree offices to see what kinds of uh, legislative initiatives their clients might be interested in pursuing or what kinds of problems they were running into with their lives and how we might be able to craft and develop legislative solutions. In 1975 we had done something that no one else had done before, which was we had gotten the State of Maine to support some funds, state funds for Pine Tree itself, uh, which had always been dependent purely on federal funds and through the appropriation we were able to open up an additional office, so I can remember some discussion in Bangor with Nancy Gentile and some people from the Bangor office with Pine Tree. Possibly some others... It's a long time ago now. And they were beginning to describe the difficulties that Spruce Run and some related organizations were having around the state and trying to operate some real, probably in this context, early primitive struggling shelters for battered women. And I remember saying, while we try and get some money from the state. And subsequently the statewide uh folks led by Nancy came back and said, I think that was.. Do you think we can do it? And we began to develop some strategies for that. Which would basically put a bill into the 1978 legislative session. See if we could get an appropriation Which is what we did.

MM: Do you remember the first meetings at the Democratic headquarters?

MC: No, I'm sorry. I know that was the Democratic headquarters in...

MM: On State Street in Augusta. Yeah those were the first meetings where the coalition actually sat down with you.

MC: I mean I remember. You know spending some time, of course Nancy primarily, I remember Mary Price who was active in the Portland shelter. I'd probably recognize every name if you could remember. Put it in front of me, but you know, learning about the issue and trying to develop some strategies and I know that we settled on, well actually, you know as is always is the case. I think there have been some independent discussions with people and at that time State Senator Barbara Trafton from Auburn agreed to put a bill in and I actually don't know if that was a suggestion that we had come up with. As part of legislative recommendations, or if it had already been, you know she's sort of taken it herself and we were playing a little bit of catch up at that time.

MM: She had, my recollection is that you talked to her, you targeted her as someone who would be a likely contender. And mentioned it to her because then after you kind of put this idea in her head, you told Nancy and me and someone else who I don't know, to make a pilgrimage to her house in Auburn where we sat down and told her what the money was going to be used for and why it was important and it was, once she had sort of had real life in front of her she agreed to sponsor the bill.

MC: And she was, you know, very, very good hardworking sponsor. Ultimately what happened that year was the politics of the world that involved her and the about to be United States Senator. So that got in the way at the end of the session, we'll get to that in a few minutes. And as I recall, I can't remember the other sponsor, but I'm sure I have to believe that we had bipartisan sponsorships and there was always a kind of a binding law that we had to have bipartisanship, during that session the Senate, Maine Senate was Republican controlled, the House was Democratic controlled and we had this provided balance. Uh, in order to get the votes in the Senate, uh, we often where we got the bill that far. I think that you know what was most memorable to me, was one, it was an issue and this from the from the beginning of the process and all the way through that session it was a constant reminder is an issue that virtually no one sort of recognized that that's the problem that we were trying to educate people about and say little bit of money to help Uh, the state sort of correct this problem, correct may be the wrong word, but deal with this problem. Combined with the fact that even though we got some money for Pine Tree, it was still not a, you know easy thing to do to get a state government to sort of hand money to a non-state agency. Pine Tree at least had a federal agency in a certain way and did that, but this was...

MM: In a track record.

MC: Yeah, and this was these non-profit groups who had no track record, who did not have a lot of institutional Uh, history or assets, if you will, or anything but the real issue was. What I mean is this a problem? Uhm, you're saying that men are beating up their wives and so the state needs to help find a place for these people to go. I don't believe that happens, time and time again, that was the mantra. And you know, to this day, having said well, half my life. Somehow or another involved in legislative processes. Still can remember most vividly the public hearing that we had on that bill in that year in 1978, because it was, it really was dramatic. And, uh, the Appropriations Committee, which is, uh, which was abandoned. Probably still is a, it's a very powerful committee, it seats high above everybody else and sort of looks down and ask people why they paying to

come and think that they can just get money and they talk to each other. They don't always pay a lot of attention. This was a hearing that was entirely different from start to finish. Uhm, because there were some very courageous people there that the coalition had organized and brought in to tell stories of what happened to them. And this was something that these legislators had just never heard before. And a packet room. As I recall, essentially nobody opposed the legislation. That was really not the problem with the issue.

MM: Only Sharlotte Lisenby.

MC: Good point. Oh, that's right, who?

MM: Sharlotte Lisenby.

MC: Oh, that's right, she was the sort of a very, very conservative Republican, but the individual who was sort of from the conservative wing.

MM: Yes, who thought the bill would break up families. She was the only opposition. And seen as a total renegade by everyone, I think.

MC: Well, you know, one of the things I remember happening at that hearing was a little commotion in the back of the room. At one point where the story went that, uhm, you know well most of the people operating the shelters were in that room they have had an emergency call come from other shelters to somebody in the room that there was a bad situation taking place. You know, as we were all sitting there and so forth and so on. To this day I'm not quite sure...they gotten very overeager in their organizing efforts to demonstrate this bill for the problem. But notwithstanding that it was a very powerful hearing. It really serves the purpose that you sometimes have to do with legislation before you get past this, educate and demonstrate and show that this is really is an issue that the government legislators public policy has to deal with. I'll stop for a second for any questions.

MM: Do you do you have any recollections of the types of people who testified at the hearing, not necessarily who they were, but the nature of the testimony they gave?

MC: As I recall there were victims, there were a couple people who were operating the shelters, there were law enforcement people. State police and composed like that. I don't know somebody, there may have been a batterer or two, is that right?

MM: Right, that sounds right, I had forgotten that.

MC: I think there was one man that said you know it happens.

MM: What's your recollection of the people in the legislature who were immediately supportive? Who, who besides Barbara? If you can recall that?

MC: Yeah, so I mean we you know we passed the bill. You know, in those days there was a tendency oftentimes to take appropriations bills that sounded pretty good. You know, one sort of wanted to vote again and take him to let them come out of the committee let them be an act by the House and end up on the Senate Appropriations table, and then at that point at the end of the session when they were dealing with appropriations bills off the table. A lot of times those good ideas would sort of get killed, not because they weren't good ideas, or the so-called lack of money. We

were able to prevent that from happening in this case. We got the bill all the way through and pass. I think that was the years of the... I have to remember the infamous all-night session.

MM: Yes, the night of the long knives, yes.

MC: The night of the long knives where I remember ending up at 6:00 o'clock in the morning. I had breakfast with Senator Jerry Conley and others after watching all this happen and our bill was in fact, the last bill enacted. Taken off the table and enacted in the political games that were going on between the Democratic House and the Republican Senate. Finally sort of worked themselves out and whatever manner we got the bill passed.

MM: And you probably don't remember, but you called me at 6:00 that morning and said, in Winterport and said it got through, come down and get briefed. And I called Nancy, and the two of us got in their car and came down and saw you totally shellshocked somewhere around 7:30 that morning.

MC: Sorry, I remember you know ultimately, driving home to Harrison. Uh, it was just an unbelievable night. I mean they were kind of deal with the last stuff and bills are being held hostage one to the other. Uhm, you know one house to the other, you know past mine I don't pass yours and all of this and then like that and they broke for a dinner late and some of the Republicans just came back after in the Senate after having many drinks and you know here if you see the record, you'll hear speeches about you know the setup President, teetering and contouring on the podium. This day themselves learned a bit of a lesson after that, and I don't think that anything like that ever repeated. I was there another almost 10 years. So, it was definitely an incredible night. So in certain, so we had legislative support. You know the Democrats, it was a bill that clearly the Democrats who had been in control of the House for only about two years or so, Uhm, we're going to rally around and again, we had enough bipartisanship on it that that getting the vote wasn't all that difficult. Uhm, I can't recall whether we have close vote calls in the Senate. Uhm, Democrats were the minority, sort of trapped within the minority, but I know we had...

MM: So she is representative then. I don't think it was close though.

MC: I don't think so either, 'cause I think it came out of committee unanimous. And it just sort of sailed right through and went through the table, surveyed the night of the long knives, and then what happened?

MM: Tell more Marshal, go on.

MC: Was this governor Longley in the last year of his term beat up the bill. And what we had to do, was override the veto and we were not able to override the veto, in some because of the political machinations between Ms. Snowe and Ms. Trafton. Ms. Trafton, I think was running for the Senate that year, and Ms. Snowe was running for Congress that year from Auburn, Democrat, Republican. And when it came time to consider overriding the veto. All best sources always said to me that, uhm. Basically, Republicans in the caucus found ten best people they could, to vote to sustain this veto and prevented us, I think we lost on a 19 to 10. Something like a 19 to 10 vote we needed 2/3 and we just set up so that some of the Republicans would vote for us because they didn't need to worry about to put any political ramifications for voting against us. And we were just unable to do anything, absolutely anything and you know, Jerry Conley has always, was fighting his heart out

for us in that Senate and just came to me and said, basically, we can't do it, that it's been, you know, sync that up and all the rhetoric that was standing.

MM: What's your best analysis of exactly what would have caused the R's to do that?

MC: I think that. I guess one announcement is they didn't want to give Barbara Trafton that kind of win. Uhm, they did not want to set up a potential future competitor to Olympia from the same base. And they may have you know some of them opposed to the idea. You know it is still giving out state money, something that Republicans are not always in favor of doing. That was the situation. I remember one other little story going back to the night of the long knives when it was all over. And the battle over this bill and the... But at that time, the state Senator Phil Merrill, without managing gold mining campaign for governor uhm, stood up and sort of quoted something from the movie Patton. He quoted a line about surveying the carnage of a battle. And saying, God help me, I love it. And Merrill was going on in The Maine State Senate for several hours. About four or five, six o'clock in the morning he was still making the same rhetoric. So that was 1978,

MM: Do you have any insights into the Longley veto?

MC: No, I think I think it was... well, who knows? I mean, I was philosophical to a fair extend. And believe that the concept of the government was providing funds in this situation to the family argument, you know when you when you we mentioned that I hadn't sort of recalled that, but there was the hardest thing that was coming at us. Somehow the concept that we were encouraging is this idea would encourage the breakup of families. And I guess he bought into that idea.

MM: Do you remember a backroom deal that he tried to make with Mary Price for the Portland project? Does that ring any bells with you?

MC: Yeah, I guess you know. I don't remember what it was, but I remember something. Something like that went on. We had about 10 days in that interim. Where are the Pine Tree house offices in a basement of a building, I don't remember what it was, what he wanted.

MM: I'm a little vague too, but my recollection is that he wanted to have her sign on to just money for the Portland shelter. He was more comfortable with the Portland agenda. He thought that they were more family oriented, I mean, this is these are very vague recollections I have.

MC: They may be in some discussions with that, but anyway, he showed up and vetoed the bill... but they would try and get all the money in the bill...

MM: Yeah, no, that wasn't the deal, it may have been on you know, If you go along with my veto 'll give you money next year kind of thing.

MC: Yeah, yeah we could have, you know we all knew when in fact I'm not sure. I think that the coalition had gone into the Bangor human services, you know and then asked for some help but they were not been given any. So anyway, so Brennan was elected and the veto threat was gone, and meantime, more things were developing around the country and Pine Tree development make us realize that we needed more than just money. And so in '79 the new legislation and then the government, reintroduced another bill both on the appropriations bill and substances bill, trying to get the law to respond, recognize protective orders and things like that. And, I don't recall we had much trouble with either of those.

MM: I was gone that year, so you're on your own here.

MC: You know we had those, those were beginnings of some good years and both of these things went through without much difficulty. And things were on their way. In a sense, the substances bill was more difficult simply because we were adding issues and sections to the legal code that where never been in there before and took a lot of work. I think Pine Tree was working for me, working with the Judiciary Committee. And worked out a good bill.

MM: Do you remember who in the battered women's movement was active with it? Deb Rice was one.

MC: Deb Rice was one and then there was another lawyer

MM: Was it a Alice Santosh?

MC: No, I think she was later. There was a lawyer woman who went over to the PUC in the early 80s and I think was involved with some of that. And I can't remember what her name was. I can visualize her, but I can't remember her name.

MM: What is your general remembrance of the coalition as to how it functioned and how it made decisions and that sort of thing, do you have any?

MC: I mean I remembrance some of that you know it was pretty good to work with, it was a very active group, committed, who had different level of education and interest and energy that... we had to respect that and work with that. It was not hard to do. Nancy was great and I think we worked very well together and I don't have any recollection, but they weren't happy with what we were trying to do at Pine Tree.

MM: Do you have any recollections of finding sometime the coalition to be a pain in the ***?

MC: Yeah, you know, we sort of sometimes but not enough of this so there was an issue with anything.

MM: What is your best memory of Nancy?

MC: I don't think one stands out just she was intensely and incredibly committed, and I think, to recognize from the politics we had to play. And that's always, it's probably the hardest. You know she's very kind with that. I tried to recognize these areas on the issue which pushed the work. She, I think was helpful in getting him to recognize that we were the experts on how to try and do this the best way. What we thought would work. So it's very, you know we complemented each other...

MM: And what was my role?

MC: Oh, you just. You help me interpret. Uhm, oftentimes you know. And I think you were very useful and effective. Because you were, you know on the Pine Tree people who is working on the issue all the time and you could, sot of being an interpreter for me or some of the other people. And then work again and well with management. I remember some of the other. One of the things that always has intrigued me was the secrecy with which the coalition sort of operated. There was a great fear of anybody knowing where these places were. I don't know if that's still the case, since the public has changed so much on this issue, but I just remember that you know, somewhere in Portland there was place. Somewhere in Bangor and you know... I mean I will say,

I've done legislative things and I always have been looking back at this issue and what we were able to do with a couple of things and I always have been and always will be proud of this. We did good.

MM: Jeez, Ann? What have I missed?

AS: Well, I think look down at your list of questions on the white sheet, and seems like there were some toward the end.

MM: Let's see, I kind of feel like Marshall has answered this but I'll give them a go. I guess while I was working on, I am scribbly phrasing this, why was working on this legislation important for you personally?

MC: Well because it was an issue that struck me, as you know, something that was important. That we had clearly demonstrated had a need. It was also an ability for me to lobby something that had no sort of negatives to it. I used to lobby for a lot of tenant legislation, and I always had to say, I'm here lobbying for the good tenants and not the bad tenants. I didn't have to adopt any kind of defensive posture or spin on the issue. It was pretty straightforward. And it was, you know, something new.

MM: What did you learn from this process that you have taken into other parts of your life?

MC: Oh, I don't know. That's a hard one.

MM: How about that it's that it's really wonderful to have a constituency? I mean that's one of the things that I got out of it.

MC: You know the issue always also related to the people talking about like places. There has to be substance to it... and meaning and a committed group of people to work for, and that's great.

MM: What, I guess the question here that the Ann has got is that Spruce Run has always considered itself or has been considered a feminist organization. What seemed feminist about when you were there? Did you feel like working with the coalition was different than working with other, I mean, aside from the fact that they were wonderful in terms of how the process went, did you see anything different from other groups you worked with?

MC: Well, I imagine there was, I mean you're right, it was, some of the people were very keen feminists. And probably had some nervousness about working with me, that there's another male. I guess I think if you look back we could've worked, you know, it's... no problems came up that stood in the way ultimately, and I don't remember sort of battling. There were philosophical battles, but there weren't really any to have, it was pretty straightforward. If you can demonstrate a good case on this issue, so let's make sure we can make it run. And you know I probably worried that you know some people in the coalition may have probably demonstrates the group case and coming at it from the wrong direction. Too feminist or too extreme direction, because it doesn't work and there wouldn't be any progress. You need to be mainstream. You know somebody says to you, you still haven't told us about this, I don't know this problem, I don't think this problem exists, you can't go off and call him crazy or you know, or come from envy, you have to talked him through it. Here is what we do, and here is what we are not going to do, we are not going to break up families, we are trying to provide.

MM: When I look back at my role in this process, I certainly did a lot of the, sort of administrative stuff, but primarily I remember, looking at the frustrated coalition, not with you personally, but with what you were telling them they needed to do in the legislative process. What you've just said and saying to them, Marshall is the best, Marshall knows what to do, Marshall is wonderful. We are going to do this. And that really was the role that I played, was being the interpreter. And coming back to you and saying they're stressing you to death Marshall, but they really don't do know what they're talking about, and they really do care, and they really will behave.

MC: Yeah no, I know and remember some of that. I mean, I'm sure it's you know it's just like a lot of people felt that that why would there be anybody saying no? And you know the process through design, so it's pretty simple so.

MM: What role did you see? Did you have any sense of how important Spruce Run was?

MC: Well, I think Spruce Run was an important collation, I really do. Always felt that. I mean I think, Mary Price was pretty active from Portland, but after that there seems to be even greater gap in sort of the state of things. I guess it was some, they were getting or trying to get a place in Augusta at that time....

MM: Probably in Belfast and also in Lewiston, Deb Hibbert, Auburn.

MC: And Spruce Run also seemed to be most sort of advanced in every way with having a place filled with supporting people... and there was another women...

MM: I think she was involved with the helpline.

AS: Did we ask him the question about how much money was in those, the first bill and then the second one?

MC: I was hoping you wouldn't cause I can't remember. How much was it? I mean, I remember went through the department in the service, it went through contracts and all that kind of stuff. Once we got it passed in '79, I want to say a couple hundred thousand, but I can't remember

MM: I don't think it was. I think it was like 2000, I don't think it was.

MC: There may have been more in '79'78. More things were ready to come online.

MM: And there was already a sort of groundswell of support, so why not? How do you think that, do you do you have any thoughts on how Spruce Run became the sort of leader of the state?

MC: Well because of Nancy.

MM: Good answer, Marshall.

MC: I mean I think Nancy, you know she is the mother of it all in.

MM: Well, I don't have any other questions, do you Ann?

AS: The only question I have is for Marshalls address so that we can send in this release form.

MC: 4104 JOHN PRAMME Corp. Fairfax, VA.

AS: 22030? Well, I will send you the release and I want to thank you very much for doing this.

MC: My pleasure, thank you for your interest. I'm sorry I don't remember more.

AS: Well, you remembered quite a lot, I think, so that's great.

MM: Yeah, one of the things that I really appreciate is that you know I was one of the interviewees too and I really I felt, I mean, Nancy was the oral history that I would have shared and I really as I was saying this thought, God this is just my memory you know and everything you've said really is exactly what I said. So now I'm very confident that in fact fifteen years later, it's true.

AS: But there were also things you remembered that Mary didn't, so that was great. You were a help.

MM: Yeah, I'm just I'm just that was my personal observation, but it made me feel better to know that I was on the right track.

MC: It's a great thing you guys are doing it. I hope it's you know, get a little attention here and there.

AS; Oh, actually there's one other thing that I'd like to ask you about, you may not know about this either, but uh, there's always been sort of an undercurrent in the feminist movement and especially more so in the 70s. That an anti-lesbian or homophobic kind of a strain from the outside world? You know, trivializing of what they were doing by dismissing them as being lesbians. And I wondered if you ever encountered that in any way in your lobbying efforts for Spruce Run.

MC: Uh, yeah it was a little of that. I mean, there was the, and you know to some extent there was the uh, for some people that was sort of the easy way out. Legislators, uh, we sort of can't substantively, effectively sort of come up with something to follow up on some things like that, I mean and this is, it's a small group of sort of reactions and extreme in their own things and yeah they were in occasional bug about that, but again, you can't, you were not able to deny the issue, and that's what the caring didn't. It didn't matter, because it was happening in the state and you had to deal with it....

MM: And it's amazing, I'm working at the women's lobby two years ago I. I think I may have said this to you when I run into you in the halls, but it's absolutely amazing to me the oral history that goes on where the Maine Legislature feels responsible for dealing with the issue of domestic violence. When it becomes a part of the sort of universal memory. Yeah, it's wonder it's incredible. I think it really speaks to how effective those first years were....

Well, hey Marshall, thank you.

MC: Oh, thank you.

MM: Yeah, thank you very much, and I still think you're wonderful.

MC: Thank you.

[End of transcript]