

Interviewer: Nicole Morin-Scribner (NMS)
Interviewee: Robert "Bob" Cote (BC)
Date: Tuesday, April 23rd, 2019
Place: Cote residence, Old Orchard Beach, Maine
Transcriber: Nicole Morin-Scribner

NMS: So, I'm just going to do a test to see how this is picking up your voice. Did you go play cards yesterday?

BC: Yes, I did

NMS: How did you make out?

BC: I won.

NMS: You won?

BC: We won (laughter)

NMS: Now, tell me again what kind of game are you playing?

BC: We play bridge

NMS: Oh, you're playing bridge

BC: yeah

NMS: And, where do you go to play bridge?

BC: We go to the St. Louis Alumni Clubhouse.

NMS: Oh, it's the St. Louis Alumni Clubhouse. Is it mostly St. Louis alumni that are there?

BC: Those of us who play bridge are St. Louis alumni. But the others who work there...there's usually bingo Monday night and the other card players on some other nights. We play twice a week, Monday and Thursday.

NMS: So, is it also a chance to re-connect with St. Louis alumni?

BC: Yeah. And we enjoy playing too. It's something to do. We're retired, so we try to keep busy. It's a challenge. It's a challenging game.

NMS: So, it's fun, it passes the time and it's challenging at the same time.

BC: It passes the time and we get to meet with our friends. And it's a challenge. We don't play for money; we're playing for fun.

NMS: OK. Well, I'm going to start the interview. Today is Tuesday, April 23rd, 2019. I have the honor today of interviewing...now do you go by Bob or Robert Cote?

BC: Either one. Most of my friends call me Bob.

NMS: I have the honor of interviewing Bob Cote and this is Nicole Morin-Scribner doing the interview. We are doing this at Bob's home in Old Orchard Beach. To get started, I'm going to ask you to introduce yourself and tell me when and where you were born.

BC: I was born in 1930. Which makes me double eight now. I was born in Biddeford, born at home. My mother chose to. My mother was a tough lady and she chose that. She had another son. I've got, I had a younger brother. She delivered at home, both of us.

NMS: Was it a doctor who came to the home or a midwife?

BC: Yeah. The doctor came, Dr. Larochelle. You know Dr. Larochelle? (laughter). He's passed away. He smoked cigars and drove a big car around Biddeford. His sons were professional men. One became a dentist in Biddeford. He was very well known.

NMS: You said your mom was a tough lady. Tell me about your mom.

BC: Ahh...my mother had a tough life. She worked at the Pepperell Manufacturing Company. She was a weaver. Probably, she never took days off. She was a widow. My dad died young. She raised the two boys. She was demanding but yet very, very, very sweet. How would I describe her? I wouldn't say, I did say she was a tough lady, but she wasn't tough in any way. She brought

us up and gave us a lot of freedom. Both my brother and I went to high school in Biddeford, at St. Louis High School. She was able to finance at least our high school.

NMS: You said she was a widow. How old was she when was a widow?

BC: She was older than my dad. My dad died at 37. She was three years older than my dad. She was born in 1903. She died in 1962.

NMS: How old were you when your dad died?

BC: I was 13

NMS: That must have been tough!

BC: Yeah. I had a younger brother, a year younger than I. I can remember my mom coming to me and say, “You’re going to be the man of the house now”. That shook me up, at 13 years old, not knowing what was ahead.

NMS: If you don’t mind my asking, had he been sick for a while or was it accidental?

BC: My dad had gall bladder surgery, got infected and they didn’t have the antibiotics that they do today. He was in the hospital for a week. It looked like he was doing well but then things turned around the infection took him.

NMS: That must have been devastating at that age especially, well at any age, but especially at that age.

BC: At any age, you know, when you lose your parents at any age...it’s not easy. My mother worked. She didn’t take days off. She went to work. She was one of their better workers too. They used to work piece work; she was able to hang on.

NMS: Now, I know what piece work is, but I doubt that people in this generation know what it is. What is your understanding? Did she talk about what it was like working for piece work?

BC: Yes. In fact, we visited her at work to see what it was like. And she would say “Don’t you dare go work there!” The humidity was so high. And the days

were long and sometimes she'd work weekends. Then there were days in the '30s, early '40s, when she'd only work four days a week or less due to lack of work. She seldom missed work. But she took a lot of interest in what we were doing too, which is good. I was involved in athletics. My mom didn't miss a game! She was there all the time. It was encouraging to see her there at football games, basketball, baseball... and she was there. She supported us.

NMS: Did you have extended family that you were connected with too?

BC: Yes, yes, yes. There were 3 aunts living with us, my grandparents, in the house.

NMS: In the same house?

BC: Yeah. There were 6 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms. The reason that was so, is because my dad worked through the Depression. My grandfather got laid off during Depression. They couldn't afford to even pay rent. My grandfather and my aunts...it was a complete household. I find this funny today, there were two tables in the kitchen. My grandmother had her table and she cooked. One of my aunts used to oversee us when my mother was at work. We had dinner together. My father was supporting the whole gang. He was paying the rent but, he died young. Fortunately, my mother was able to work.

My grandfather, he worked for the WPA for a while. That saved us and saved him too. It saved his pride. He wasn't supporting his family and it bothered him. I could see it, even being young. He supported the family. I don't think we were the only ones. We got along with grandpa.

My grandmother was a sweetheart (laughter). She would bake pies. I can remember coming from a date and having a quart of milk and whole pie (laughter).

NMS: A quart of milk and whole pie?

BC: Yeah (laughter) They would bake, her and one of my aunts (who never worked outside the home, but she did later on in life). She was a baker. She was great at food. Actually, she was my godmother. Godmother to one of my sons too.

NMS: Now the WPA, those were projects?

BC: Yeah. Roosevelt's project provided work for people who were looking for work.

NMS: Do you know what specific project?

BC: I know he worked on sidewalks. He built sidewalks in the town of Biddeford. I think that's probably the one that my grandfather worked at. He also later on worked for the parish. He built the parish hall.

NMS: The St. Joseph's Parish Hall?

BC: Yeah. We lived right behind, the house right behind. We were there when they built it. It was parish land. That was our back yard. That's where we played. I was brought up on Kossuth Street. You know where that is?

NMS: Yes, I do.

BC: Kossuth Street. There were kids all over the place. I still see people. In fact, when I go to church, I see Leo Laverriere. He was the youngest of the Laverriere boys. He was there. Their father was a barber. He used to cut my hair.

NMS: What was it like, as a kid, growing up on Kossuth Street?

BC: Ahh...it was good. We had a lot of friends. My parents encouraged it. My father had a car. We'd go out on Sundays, to the lake. We often brought some of our friends with us. And then we'd be playing ball at St. Joseph's, St. Louis yard. On South Street, we'd have our sleds and slide down the street. They went to St. Joseph's, same school we did. They were good friends and we were able to enjoy ourselves. Our parents were very lenient and encouraging us.

NMS: Did you speak French or English at that time, or both?

BC: We spoke both, but I think that there was more French than English.

NMS: Even the kids playing out in the neighborhood.

BC: Ah, oui. On parlait français [translation : Oh yes. We spoke French]

NMS: On parlait français

BC: Oui. Des fois c'était pas trop beau (laughter) mais on parlait français.
[translation: Yes. Sometimes it wasn't very nice, but we spoke French]
Ah oui, des Laverrieres c'était nos amis [translation: ah yes, the Laverrieres were our friends] and they spoke French too. The mother didn't work, my mother would but their mother didn't, and their father was a barber.

NMS: Do you know how your family came to be in Biddeford in the first place?

BC: My grandparents were born in Canada?

NMS: Do you know where?

BC: Granby. That's where they were. They brought me there a couple of times. They moved to Biddeford to work in the mills. My grandmother worked in the mills. My grandfather worked in the mills. They raised their families here too, in Biddeford. They were strong Catholics and they wouldn't miss Sunday Mass. We went to Catholic schools. Actually, I don't think to any other school but a Catholic school.

NMS: and it was St. Joseph

BC: It was called St. Joseph. We went there for 6 grades. At the 7th grade, we went to the brothers. That was at St. Louis. So, we were at St. Louis for 7th and 8th grade, junior high. Then at high school for 4 years, with the brothers and the nuns.

*NMS: Do you remember what it was like in elementary school at St. Joseph's?
What are your recollections of that?*

BC: With the nuns, we had some tough nuns. They were demanding, which was good. In fact, you talked about Toots Bouthot. He was in class with me. He would go around the class with his guitar, he and his brother and they would sing. The nuns encouraged that. They would teach music. But I refused to study and learn music. I didn't want to learn music or to read it and I should have.

My dad was a musician. He had a great voice. He sang at church. He sang at City Theater in some of their plays. I can remember him playing "Old Black Joe". He played the baritone.

My brother had a beautiful voice. I don't know what happened to me. He had a really nice voice. My brother started to take piano lessons. My father encouraged it. My father went to school in Canada. He went to Victoriaville. He was born in Sanford. My brother started to take piano lessons. It's my fault, we discouraged him. We needed another ball player. He was practicing his piano and we'd knock on the window "Come out! Come out and play!" He eventually stopped with his piano lessons, which was too bad.

NMS: When you went to school, was that in French, in English or half and half?

BC: Half and half. Half in French and half in English. When we played outside a lot of our friends spoke French but, as we got a little older, English became predominant. We would talk French at home. My mother, and my aunts would say "Parlez français!" [translation: Speak French]. But, once you start listening to the radio and reading and playing out with friends, and some of our friends couldn't speak French, so English became the predominant language.

NMS: Is it in elementary school you said you were into athletics? Did that start in elementary school?

BC: Not elementary. I'd say junior high. I started to play in the 6th grade. We would play with a rubber ball when we were in the early grades. We enjoyed that.

NMS: So, baseball came first?

BC: Yes. Baseball came first, that's right. Sixth grade, I played with the older kids, 7th and 8th graders. Then we played against our opponents down the street, St. André. We played a couple of games a year. Then we played Saco, Biddeford Junior High and so on.

NMS: It was organized teams connected to those schools?

BC: Oh yes! We had uniforms and we would go play. It was mostly 7th and 8th graders. But I remember that one of the Brothers who was coaching was looking for a catcher and he saw me in the school yard, and he said, "Do you want to play baseball?" I said "Yeah!" "OK. You come over and practice." There weren't too many 6th graders. I was the only 6th grader who played. That's because he encouraged it and he saw what I was doing in the school yard.

NMS: When did you start picking up the other sports?

BC: The other sports, I picked it up in high school. I joined the Boy Scouts. Troop 308, and I became a scout. We played with the scouts. We played basketball and then picked up the other sports. I loved school. I think it was because of sports, the athletic things. But I really enjoyed going to school. We lived within walking distance from school. We'd come home for lunch. We had over an hour for lunch. School was fun!

NMS: Were the rivalries from school to school, did that exist when you were in high school as well?

BC: In high school, oh yes! Thornton Academy was a rival. Biddeford were rivals. Oh yes!

NMS: For some of the sports or all of the others?

BC: All the sports. All of them. Sports were my life, really. My father was a hockey player. He went to Victoriaville. He graduated from school in Victoriaville. When he came out here, he began to officiate hockey games.

NMS: There were some hockey games here in town?

BC: There were some kind of semi-pro hockey games. They played here and Westbrook Skating Rink and Silver Skating Rink. [Note: used to be located across the street from Westbrook Skating Rink]. At four years old, I was on skates. My dad would take me to the games. We were skating.

NMS: Did that continue, in terms of hockey, as you grew older?

BC: There was no hockey in high school. None at all. Had there been, I'm sure I would have played hockey. But, no. During the winter months I played basketball.

NMS: Tell me about when you were in high school. Is there any game in particular, when you were playing in high school, that stands out?

BC: Oh yes. There's some games when we played Biddeford and played Thornton Academy, those were the rival games. We'd win our share of the games.

After the season, I'd play with some of the Biddeford kids, Thornton kids and the other places.

The Parish Hall was next door to where I lived. My grandfather had a key to the hall. I knew where it was. So, I spent time in the Parish Hall playing basketball: sometimes by myself, sometimes with some of my friends. (laughter)

NMS: That was a nice thing to have!

BC: Well, my grandfather had the key because the pastor... sometimes the lights were left on. The pastor gave the key to my grandfather because we lived so near. My grandfather would put the lights out and the pastor or the priest wouldn't have to come over in the wintertime and lock the doors or put the lights back on. So, my grandfather had the key. He didn't know that I knew where it was. He probably knew that I did, he probably did (laughter) but I'd sneak in and go play.

NMS: Your friends must have been impressed that you had access to your own private basketball court.

BC: If they came, yeah, I don't know that they were impressed but sometimes they would come with me and play. We had a basket in our backyard too.

NMS: You mentioned when you were younger that the St. Joseph's kids would play St. André's. Did St. André's have a high school?

BC: No. There was a junior high, 7th and 8th grade.

NMS: Where did they go to high school, the St. André's kids?

BC: Some went to Biddeford. Quite a few of them went to Biddeford. The better athletes went to Biddeford. They got talked into it by the coach. Biddeford had some real good teams. We beat them a few times, but they still had good teams. There were a lot of French kids too: Cordeau, Cartier...des noms français. [translation: French names].

NMS: How tough was it for them to integrate when it was time to go to high school if they were rivals up until that point?

BC: They were rivals. We were rivals in high school too. Some of them went into high school and others stayed at St. Louis. I don't know if I would have said "I want to go to Biddeford," if my parents would have allowed me to go to Biddeford. I don't think so.

NMS: Why do you think... what were the feelings about that?

BC: You want to go to a Catholic school. You need to see the Brothers. The Brothers will take care of you. You will be disciplined by the Brothers. (laughter). We didn't have a choice. I don't know if I would have said "I want to go to Biddeford" if they would have allowed me. My dad was gone by then. And there was no tuition at the Catholic high school, no tuition at all. We sometimes had to rent books, but it was almost nothing.

NMS: What were things like in the city on game night, when St. Louis had to play Biddeford?

BC: It was fine. We got along good with the Biddeford kids. Sometimes after the season we'd form a team and go play together against... one time we were playing in tournaments in Portland, Sanford and Biddeford. Sometimes we'd play two games in one night.

NMS: Did you socialize together too? Did people from St. Louis date people from Biddeford?

BC: Not that much. Normally we'd date Biddeford kids, but I don't think it happened a lot. They inter-married later on. I know I went to the Biddeford High School prom my senior year but that's because the president of Biddeford High School class, Junior Lafontaine, invited me. There was some inter-mingling.

NMS: What did teenagers do for fun when you were in high school?

BC: Ah...(laughter). We'd go to movies. Movies was the predominant thing. We'd go to some of the restaurants and have a coke, after the movies. There were dances. There was a club in Biddeford that had Saturday night dances for the kids. So that's what we did. I think going to movies was the predominant thing. Or, go walking hand in hand with your sweetheart.

NMS: Did you go to the beach much?

BC: Ah...in the summertime! In the summertime we'd go to the beach. We'd take the bus, a nickel, and go to Old Orchard Beach, go for a swim. More than a swim. We'd stay there a good part of the day. We'd go with our parents too.

My father had a car. But after he passed away my mother sold it. She never drove. She didn't have a driver's license. I didn't have a car and high school kids didn't have a car. In our class there was one guy who drove to school with a car. He lived in Saco and he came to Biddeford. He just passed away this past week. He was living in Florida. His name was Normand Rock. Its funny that comes up. He was a friend of mine too. He had a car.

NMS: I bet he was popular.

BC: Oh yeah. He drove it to school. He was an only child. He lived in Saco. He became my friend. Maybe the car had some attraction but I'm sure there was something else. He was a fine boy. He could take us to the beach and to the movies but that wasn't the reason.

NMS: I only mention that because I'm sure that was a novelty.

BC: Oh yeah. One car. There were a few others ahead of us in high school, who would go to school with a car. Those were the boys, mostly boys I don't think girls had cars, mostly the parents had a little bit of wealth. So, they were able to have a car.

NMS: I saw that you were the valedictorian of your class?

BC: Oui [translation: yes]

NMS: Oui? Must have worked hard to achieve that?

BC: Well, I did my studies, you know. I spent time studying. I not only played athletics. I had to squeeze in, I always did the assignments, I had to. My mother saw to it anyways.

NMS: Did you work when you were in high school?

BC: Only in the summer. During school I did not work. That's because my mother said, "I don't want you to work. You mind your studies, play sports. In the summertime, then we'll find a job for you." All through high school I worked in the summertime, when we were out of school. And I turned my entire paycheck to my mother.

NMS: Where did you work?

BC: I worked a couple of years Biddeford Box Shop. It doesn't exist anymore. They made wooden boxes. I also worked at St. Louis Alumni. I took care of the field one summer. My job was to take care of the athletic field. As I got older, when I went into college, I worked at the White Star Laundry, on a truck. I collected the laundry at the beach. I also worked for Delorges' Bakery. I was older then. I was married when I worked for Delorges.

NMS: When you were in high school, were the boys and girls together or were they separate?

BC: (laughter) We were separate! Two different buildings. And then when they put them in the same building, there were doors. No...no! (laughter)

NMS: So, were they in the building when you were in high school?

BC: My senior year in high school, they were in the same building. But the doors were closed (laughter) ...from the boys.

NMS: Was there any peeking?

BC: (laughter) I'm sure. We did (laughter)

NMS: If it was your senior year when girls came into the building, do you remember what that was like?

BC: It made very little difference.

NMS: Because they kept the doors closed.

BC: Yeah. And they were not in the same class

NMS: Oh, they were in the building, but the classes were not coed.

BC: No. They had their own classes. Oh yeah. They started to bring girls into class with the boys when I was teaching at St. Louis.

NMS: When it came time to graduate...

BC: There were two separate graduations. The boys had their own graduation. The girls had their own graduation. I might not have been top of the class if the girls were in school with us (laughter).

NMS: When did you start thinking about the possibility of going to college?

BC: When I was in high school, I told my mother, "I'm going to college." She said, "I can't afford it." I said, "I know mom. I'm going to get a scholarship and I'll be able to go to school." She said, "Good luck to you." One of my aunts said, "I'll pay half the tuition, or I'll pay the total tuition." I said, "OK." But she was thinking of a hundred dollars. When I got a scholarship and paid the whole thing, my aunt said I didn't mean to pay the whole thing. I said, "It's OK." It didn't cost me anything to go to college.

NMS: How did you choose Boston College?

BC: Boston College was well known, famous. I was recruited.

NMS: I wondered.

BC: I was recruited. I was recruited at UNH, Bowdoin College and BC. So, I visited the schools. Here again, here comes the Catholic influence, the Jesuits. They said, "Come over here and it won't cost you a penny. Books, tuition, meals, everything." I said, "OK." My mother was happy. I said, "I told you I'd get a scholarship!" So, there I was.

NMS: Must have been a big transition to go from Biddeford to Boston?

BC: Yes, it was.

NMS: What was that like?

BC: Well, I'll tell you this... when I went up there, had I come home that weekend, I wouldn't have gone back. I wouldn't have gone back. I didn't talk to anyone about that. I said to myself, "I've got a good opportunity. Don't throw it away. Go back." So, I went back and I'm glad I did. But it was only one week and if I'd have gone back, I know what would have happened.

NMS: It was very different from home?

BC: It wasn't that different. The classes weren't that different. I think one advantage is football and you make friends. Like the first week, you had to make some friends. So, that helps. Being in athletics helped make up my mind to stay. I know one case. When I was in college, there was a good football player from Biddeford. His brother went to BC. He went to BC. He went for one week. After one week he came home. He had a girlfriend and went home for the weekend. He didn't come back. The coach liked him. They thought he was going to be a good football player and they liked him. They said, "Can you talk to him? Call him up on the phone and see if he's going to come." He never made it. He didn't come back. Too bad.

NMS: Had there been other Biddeford players that went to BC before you?

BC: Oh yeah! When I was there, we were three on the team. One was a senior. The other one was a sophomore. He didn't go right from high school. He went to prep school for a year, then he went to college. He graduated from college.

NMS: Did you find the studies difficult?

BC: No

NMS: You felt well prepared?

BC: Yeah. Yeah

NMS: Being Franco-American, did you feel like you fit in? There must have been people from...

BC: A lot of Irishmen (laughter). Yeah, we fit in.

NMS: No issues

BC: Yeah, not for me, anyways. I guess it could have been, if you let it happen. But, no. Je parlais français [translation: I spoke French]. They never called me “Frenchy”. But the other guy, there was a guy from Woonsocket, they called him Frenchy. There was a good mixture. We had fun (laughter).

The Jesuits, some of them were mean. There was one, Father O’Connor, God bless his soul. He’d come in his classroom one day, Philosophy. He takes his briefcase and throws it on the desk. He said, “Yes sir! This is Black Dan O’Connor, alias Dirty Dan. Now run to the registrar and get your class changed!” (laughter) That was his spiel. I said to myself, “He’s not going to scare me!” (laughter)

NMS: So, football was a big thing over there?

BC: It’s a big thing. I was on the team. We were a freshman team. They don’t do that anymore, you know freshman team, they all the same. When I was there, we had to play on the freshman team. So, I played on the freshman team and my last three years I played in the varsity. In fact, my senior year I won the scholastic athletic [award]. Did you know that?

NMS: Yes, I did. That’s quite an accomplishment!

BC: You know who the guest speaker was?

NMS: Tell me

BC: JFK. He was Senator then. There was a funny story about that. When he became President, I told my kid “I met him. I know him.” “Oh yeah Dad, sure! You know him!” Then the Athletic Director at BC got a picture and he sent the picture to my house. Then I showed it to my kid and I said, “See! I knew Kennedy!” (laughter)

NMS: That must have been especially meaningful.

BC: Oh yeah. I didn’t expect that.

NMS: Was any of your family able to go to that banquet?

BC: No, they didn’t. They couldn’t afford it.

NMS: Were you able to come home very often when you were...

BC: Anytime I wanted to. We'd hitchhike. My first year they would pay us to travel. (laughter) Yeah.

NMS: To travel home?

BC: Yeah. We'd go to a game, we'd go play someplace else, they would give us spending money. But then they stopped that. The NCAA put a stop to that. Yeah, they would give us five dollars. Five dollars to me was a lot of money.

French wasn't a big issue. There's one little episode between Father Black Dan and I. I was going to the prom with a girl from Biddeford and she had a French name. We had to write down the name of our date. And he looked at that, and he used to get after me...Coté, they called me Coté [note: Co-tay] which is the proper pronunciation, and he'd say "Why don't you take an Englishman! Why are you taking a Frenchman to the dance?" I said, "She's as American as you, Father!" And he let me get away with it. Because he was getting at me. That's what he wanted, he wanted you to fight back. He was teaching logic. You had to answer him or else he'd murder you. He went to teach Philosophy at Regis College and he got fired. He failed too many girls. (laughter). He was Black Dan, Dirty Dan O'Connor and he was proud of that. He was proud of that.

NMS: What did you study when you were in college?

BC: I studied Economics. My degree is BS in Economics. And I went back a year after. I got a teaching fellowship at BC.

NMS: A teaching fellowship...

BC: Yeah.

[break]

NMS: We were talking your college days

BC: College professors. Dirty Dan (laughter)

NMS: When you went into college, what was your goal? What did you think you'd do once you...

BC: I was thinking of doing some math, mathematics, and possibly going into some kind of engineering. But I didn't know, really, what I wanted to do. If they'd ask me at that time, "What do you want to do?" I would have said, "I want to coach. I want to coach. I want to deal with young people." That became a reality.

NMS: I think I read somewhere that not only were you recruited from high school to go to college but, where you were such an outstanding athlete in college, did you have an opportunity to do something with that as a career?

BC: I coached with Mike Holovak over there. He was the head coach when I was a senior at BC. He got me on the staff the following year. I could have stayed there and become an assistant coach. That's how you start. But I got married and I had a child. I said, "I know what they go through and I don't want that." Because Micky was born when I was in graduate school at BC. I was also coaching football. I know that they had to go to work during the football season at 7 o'clock in the morning. They were there until 10 o'clock at night. There's no time for family. I said, "I want a family too." So, I said, "I'm going to do something else."

NMS: Where did you meet your wife?

BC: In high school. I met her in high school. She's another Frenchman from Biddeford. She was a junior and I was a freshman.

NMS: Did you continue dating when you were in college?

BC: Yeah. Off and on but mostly on.

NMS: After you got married, while you were still in college, did she move to Boston?

BC: Well, she was going to, but she got pregnant. She was working and she had insurance. And if she had moved to Boston she might have been without...although the football coach at BC offered her a job in his office. He had an insurance business. He said, "If your wife wants to work over here..." But, she was all set up there and she stayed here. I used to travel. I worked. I'd go to graduate school, coach football and travel. I had some night classes and I would

come home by train. Not every night. I'd come home Thursday night and go back Monday morning. That's when Micky was born. He was staying in Biddeford with his mother.

NMS: That must have been a full plate!

BC: Yeah. It was. (Laughter)

NMS: So how did you then end up back in Biddeford?

BC: I came back in Biddeford and they offered me at St. Louis. They said, "Do you want to work at St. Louis?" I said, "Yeah!" So I went to work at St. Louis as an assistant coach. I did that for three years and then I was head coach for a long time.

NMS: Were you teaching as well?

BC: Oh yeah.

NMS: Coaching was on the side?

BC: Oh yeah. I like teaching. I enjoy teaching.

NMS: What did you teach?

BC: US History and Economics. And I introduced at St. Louis, Advanced Placement US History. And when I went to Thornton, they didn't have it. So, we got Advanced Placement US History. They can get college credits by going through that. Did you do that?

NMS: When I was in school, of course St. Louis closed. I don't think we had that option and then we were on double sessions.

BC: Oh yeah. That was too bad. This Advanced Placement is really ...and now its become even more so. I taught Economics at Thornton too. Do you know who got me to do that?

NMS: Who?

BC: Mickey. He went to the guidance counselor to arrange his schedule. He talked to Joe McCarthy and said, "I'd be interested in taking a course in Economics." And he said, "We don't have it. We don't have a teacher to teach it." Mickey said, "You've got one, my father!" So, I got stuck with all the preparation because of that! (laughter)

NMS: Now, that was at Thornton, right?

BC: Yeah, at Thornton. So he's the one who said, "Oh yeah, you've got one. My father can teach Economics." (Laughter)

NMS: You must have seen a lot of changes in what it was like to teach high school through the years.

BC: Yes. There was a big change from St. Louis to Thornton. Once I got to Thornton...WO! There was a difference in the attitudes of the kids.

NMS: Can you tell me more about that?

Break

NMS: So, you were telling me that there was a big change in the attitude in the students at St. Louis vs Thornton?

BC: Yeah. Yeah. I mean their attitude and their work ethic was a lot different. You give an assignment and half the class does it? This didn't happen at St. Louis. When you gave an assignment, everybody did it. Over there, especially I had a freshman class my first year, teaching Civics, and boy, those kids weren't doing their assignments. They weren't doing anything. By the end of the year, I had them doing some things. It's either that or you're failing, you know. You had to do the assignments. I would give the kids one assignment a week, a written assignment. Especially with those that had difficulty. Then you progress, expecting to get a little more from them. Yeah, I was amazed at their attitude!

NMS: I remember one of the things you said earlier that you were teaching at St. Louis when they finally let the girls be part of the class.

BC: Yeah. I taught some girls too.

NMS: What led them to make the decision to finally make the change? Do you know?

BC: I really don't know. I think it's probably the teacher ratio. How many teachers they had. I can remember going in to teach an all girls class at St. Louis. They weren't mixed then. The Principal was going to a convention in Atlantic City. She asked me to take the class, her History class. That was an experience too!

NMS: What was it about that, that was an experience?

BC: I walked into that classroom and they all stand up. "Good morning Mr. Cote". I mean, the boys never did that! (Laughter) WO! I said, "You girls are very nice and polite!" Then, sometimes I would lecture or talk, give questions and I want the answers fast. I'd ask them a question and then they'd stand up! It took them a half an hour. I was wasting a lot of time in the class. I said, "No. You don't have to stand up every time I question you. You want to stand up and say something, you may. But, don't do this. And then I would sit on the desk, feet dangling. I could see the reactions in their face. The nuns don't do that! (Laughter). I was only there for two weeks.

NMS: Was it well received when the girls became part of the class as well?

BC: Oh yeah. A lot of the girls were happy to be in with the boys.

NMS: Were the teachers receptive to that?

BC: Yeah. The Brothers were too.

NMS: And were the boys happy about that?

BC: Most of them. Some of them, I don't think they like the idea of having girls, but most of them were. Yeah. If I remember right.

NMS: How much time did it take to prepare for the teaching part of your job vs coaching?

BC: About the same. Because I always told the kids that coaching is teaching. So, if you are a coach you are a teacher. You teach and that's what you did in the

classroom, you taught them. You teach techniques, you teach plays, you teach that they need to learn. So, I didn't find much difference between teaching and coaching.

NMS: Were parents as actively involved? Did you get much interference from parents?

BC: You know what, never. I never got parent interference...well, maybe once or twice. I hear some coaches say, "Boy, the parents are on my back. They call me all the time." I didn't get phone calls. I handled them I guess (laughter).

NMS: And you had a pretty decent record!

BC: Yeah. Oh yeah. But I enjoyed it.

NMS: What stands out for you in terms of your accomplishments in high school coaching at St. Louis?

BC: Well, for the most part, it's the championships we won. I've got to say this, I was successful in all sports. I coached basketball five years and we made the tournament five years. We got to play in the New England Catholic Tournament. We played there when I was coaching. In baseball, the only time St. Louis won the Championship Telegram League, I was coaching. Didn't win a championship in basketball but we did well in basketball too.

NMS: And then there was football.

BC: Oh yeah. Football, I was very successful there. Yeah.

NMS: That's an understatement!

BC: Well, I don't know. The kids we had. They played lots of sports too. And that's why we were successful in basketball and in baseball. You treat them well and they will treat you too, very well.

NMS: Are there any special plays or strategies that you had?

BC: Oh yeah! (Laughter) Not too many. We did something that hadn't been done around here for a while. We run back punts. When they kicked to us, we were

able to... I had a play and we would run back punts. The first game that I coached, we were playing Sanford, I think we ran back three punts. And after that we ran back punts all the time. And the other teams never did to us. That's comforting. I liked that part. (Laughter) I made a film out of it. I don't know where it is now. I took from some of these different plays. I spoke at a clinic and brought that to show. The kids that are gone, they played in college, they borrowed that thing and so I don't where it is. I've lost it.

NMS: Are there any games in particular at St. Louis that stand out for you?

BC: Oh, we beat Thornton 27 to 26 one year. That stands out, you know. I mean you get close games. Good teams, you're both undefeated. Sometimes...Thornton beat us one year. We were undefeated and they beat us. That stands out. Sometimes good, sometimes not.

NMS: I read something that I thought was interesting with regards to the players sharing the plays in French.

BC: Oh yeah!

NMS: So tell me about that.

BC: That's a story! We were playing basketball at Traip Academy. Traip had pretty good team and so did we. The thing is that St. Louis never had height. Although some years we did have Al Daigle. You know Al Daigle? Yeah, well we were playing at Traip. Traip was beating us at the beginning, the first quarter. So, I changed the defense. We started to press them. The kids were conversing in French, talking to each other. "I've got him. You take him." All of a sudden, we are ahead! The official said, "You can't do that. You can not talk French." I said, "Why?" He said, "You are taking unfair advantage of this team by speaking French." I said, "No we're not!" I said they come down here and they're talking with fingers. Play number 2; 1; 3. I said, "My kids don't understand that. You are taking unfair advantage of us!" "Oh, no...no...no." They called technical fouls on us. The official went to talk to Brother Damian who is the Athletic Director. Brother Damian was all insulted. He said, "Your kids can't speak French? I mean English? They can all speak English!"

Is that what you heard? (Laughter)

NMS: I thought that was an interesting story.

BC: Yeah. Here's a story. I tell you that.

NMS: Do you still stay in contact with any of your former kids... kids, people that you used to coach or teach?

BC: Oh yeah. They've sat right there. Some of them, yeah.

NMS: Tell me from your perspective what it was like in terms of St. Louis closing.

BC: Were you there when they closed? Do you know who's talking? Who closed it? Me...I was in charge that day. Were you sitting in the audience?

NMS: At the Parish Hall?

BC: Yeah. I was the one that announced to the kids that school was closing. You know why? Because the principal went to a convention in Atlantic City. And he said to me, "Do you want to take charge at the school, while we're gone?" I had never done that before. I said, "OK. I'll do it." I said, "They're not going to announce the closing of the school?" "Oh, no...no...no! That's not going to happen." He left. I got stuck with it. I wasn't happy with that. That was unfair. Unfair to the kids and unfair to me.

NMS: When did the faculty find out?

BC: Some knew. That's when I found out, although I had an idea that it was going to happen. But, that wasn't right. Especially where I'd asked him and he said, "No.". He had a letter in the safe from the bishop announcing the closing of the school.

NMS: What was it like after you made the announcement? Did people come back to you? What was that like for you?

BC: A lot of the kids were crying. The girls were crying, especially. They didn't blame me for that. I think that they understood that I wasn't to blame. The principal, he knew. I don't know why he lied to me. He could have just let it go and make the announcement when he was there.

NMS: And then you had to make a difficult decision in terms of what you were going to do.

BC: I knew. Thornton offered me the job. They had offered me the job twice before. Two other times. Lewiston had offered me a job over there. The kids knew that. One time I was offered a job from Lewiston. I was a good friend with the Lewiston coach and their faculty. They offered me the job. I couldn't take it because Lewiston was like on strike. The teachers, you couldn't sign a contract. So, I couldn't sign a contract with them. I was thinking seriously of taking it. I had a family and wanted to take care of them. We went to Lewiston looking at houses and brought the kids with me. They weren't too happy about changes schools though either.

My sons all came to Thornton. The girls went to Biddeford.

NMS: Is there any reason in particular why that happened?

BC: I told the boys I was going to Thornton. I said, "If you want to go to Thornton, you can." Because I made that a stipulation in my contract. That they could go there, all my kids, tuition free. They did that at Thornton, for me. Then they began to do that for other teachers because they had to.

Mickey said right away, "I want to go to Thornton. I want to play football for you." That's what he said.

John, my second one, was an eighth grader. He became a freshman. He would have been a freshman at Biddeford. I think the reason he changed is because of the double sessions. He decided, he said he was going to go to Thornton. Then the day we are leaving to go to Thornton, I could tell something was wrong when I was having breakfast with him. He looked pitiful. I said, "You don't want to go huh?" He said, "No. All my friends are at Biddeford." I said, "I told you, if you want to go to Biddeford, you can. You came to Thornton and got your whole schedule fixed out. Do me a favor. Try it for one week. You don't do much the first week. Try it. If you still don't like it, we can make the change. You'll go." After one week he didn't say anything. He never came back and say, "I want to go to Biddeford." He never came back, not once. John said, "I'm not going to Biddeford. I'm going to live with my friends in Saco. He got in and fit in and liked it.

NMS: And obviously you adapted even though it was a change

BC: Oh yeah. It was a change, but not a difficult change for me. Some of the teaching was. In football too, it took a little bit of time to get those kids to do things the way I wanted them to but that's alright.

NMS: Did you have a successful football season the first year you were at Thornton?

BC: Well, we won more games than we lost but not by many. It took a little while. You were dealing with a different type of student. Thornton really has a lot of good kids too! But, they've got a lot more bad kids too.

NMS: When you look at your teaching and coaching career, how did it feel when you were selected to be in the Maine Sports Hall of Fame?

BC: I was pleased with that. I mean, it's quite an honor.

NMS: Do you remember how you found out?

BC: I don't.

NMS: Do you remember the ceremony itself?

BC: Oh yeah. I remember the ceremony. My son-in-law taped the whole thing. He's got it on tape.

NMS: In terms of another honor, one the things I came across was the very last yearbook for St. Louis. And who was that very last yearbook at St. Louis dedicated to?

BC: To me.

NMS: Yes. It was dedicated to you.

BC: Yeah. And there's the picture...

NMS: And there's the picture of you when you received that award at Boston College presented to you by then Senator John F. Kennedy.

BC: Yeah. He was the guest speaker at that program. It was at the Statler Hotel and I had to rent a tux.

NMS: You had to rent a tux?

BC: Yeah, look. A tux and a bow tie.

You know what I did with my St. Louis yearbooks? I left them all at the Biddeford Library. They're all there. I think they're there. I brought them there.

NMS: One of the things I wanted to ask you for your perspective some major events that occurred during your lifetime. So, we are talking about John F. Kennedy. What do you remember about when we all learned of his assassination?

BC: I remember pretty well. Did it affect me? Yeah. Because I liked Kennedy, but my wife didn't. That lady over there, Rita (pointing to her picture). She didn't like Kennedy. She would say, "You and your Kennedy." (Laughter) Politics...

Break

NMS: Do you remember where you were when you found out about President Kennedy?

BC: I'm trying to think back. I may have been in my car...on the radio, coming home from school. I think that's where I was.

NMS: In terms of other events, I think you were in high school at the time when there was a big fire in Biddeford, in 1947?

BC: Oh yeah.

NMS: Do you remember that?

BC: Yes I do!

NMS: Yes you do!

BC: Yes I do! We were released from school and we went out. This is unbelievable! We had brooms to fight the fire, in some places! We stayed out of school for the rest of that week, until it started to rain. We ended up in Biddeford

Pool and Fortunes Rock. It was all burning on the side of that island there. We ended up in Dayton and some of these places. We ended up in Alfred, where the Brothers are, putting the fires out. We had a tank of water on our back and putting fire out there. We'd turn around and fire again. It was burning underground.

NMS: You said something about brooms? What did you do with the brooms?

BC: Fight the fire in the field. Bang...bang...bang! They brought us brooms. They released us from school. We went to the fire station, signed up. They gave us an assignment. We went out in the fields to fight the fire. A couple of nights we spent overnight in the woods. Like in Alfred, we stayed there the whole night in the apple fields, fighting fire with the Brothers.

NMS: That must have been scary

BC: No. It was an adventure (laughter). It was an adventure.

NMS: It must have been scary for your mother

BC: Yeah, probably. (Laughter). My mother and my aunts.

NMS: Have you ever been tempted to move out of Biddeford?

BC: I told you. I went to look in Lewiston. I went to look at Saco. I was offered a job at Thornton. Where else...Oh, I was offered a job in Massachusetts. Hate to leave. When you fit in, it feels good. It feels good to go to work in the morning. The only other was to go at BC, it was tempting. But I knew what it involved and I said, "I want to be a coach, but I also want to be a father." I want to be not only a teacher but a father. I was well on my way of being a father at that time.

NMS: Another interesting story that I read about you was a player coming to see you at the house to ask you about some coaching thing and you said, "Wait a minute. I need to change the diaper first."

BC: (laughter). That's probably coming from somebody else.

NMS: So, you weren't afraid to change a diaper.

BC: No. We had six children and four of them came quite early between. Very little difference between them. She was a great lady, too. It was tough losing her. And I got married again and lost her again, too. I lost two. And they were both St. Joseph graduates. Yeah.

NMS: Have you shared your love of sports with your children? You did mention your children and you have grandchildren as well.

BC: Oh yeah. I've got grandkids. I've got a lot of grandkids. I got one coming now, pretty soon. I don't know if its a boy or a girl.

Did you see the article in the paper about Bobby Cote? I'll show you that before you leave.

NMS: Bobby Cote, would he be...

BC: You know the boy who called me just now? Chuck? He called me when his son was born. He's got two sons, and he called me. That was the older one. And he said, "I'm going to call him after you. It's about time, somebody calls one after you." So, they called him Bobby. He didn't play football. He started, but he got banged. He played basketball and he played baseball. He was the scoring champ for York County in basketball. He's the second in his class at Biddeford. He went to Orono and studied engineering, chemical engineering. He's working at the Navy Yard. Now, he's in California for work for the Navy Yard, chemical engineering.

NMS: That's a lot to be proud of.

BC: Yeah . Yeah.

NMS: That warms the heart.

BC: Yeah. It does.

NMS: What is something people might be surprised to find out about living in the Biddeford area.

BC: Surprised? Hmmm.... What could they be surprised? I can't put a finger on it.

NMS: That's ok. Let me ask you this. What is something you want to make sure people take away from hearing your story?

BC: Take away from hearing my story? I don't know. It may trouble some of them. (Laughter). I don't know what to say there. I'm happy with what I did. I'm happy with my life. That's my life.

NMS: Is there anything else you'd like to share that maybe I didn't ask?

BC: You asked a lot of questions. The thing is maybe we could have dealt more with my family, my grandfather and my grandmother.

NMS: I'd love to hear more about your grandfather and your grandmother!

BC: And my aunts. I was living with three aunts. They spoiled me! My grandma spoiled me. She was the sweetest lady ever. If there was something at my table that I didn't like, she would offer what she made. She'd go to Mass every morning, 6:30 Mass in the morning. My grandfather belonged to, and my grandmother too...CLAA. Do you know what that is?

NMS: No I don't

BC: I'll tell you what I said about it. It's Cercle L'Accordaire Association Anti-Alcholic. They had a blue button, they put it on. My grandfather did NOT belong to that at first. I used to say, "CLAA- Can't Leave Alchohol Alone." (Laughter). He worked at the mill. He made his own home brew. He drank too much. He gambled and he had a big family. But, he had a good heart. One day I guess he decided he was going to join the "blue button." He didn't have any money. He had to go to Fall River to see the priest. My mother told me this. He said to his wife, "I want to stop drinking and gambling. I'm going to go there." My grandmother said, "Don't give him the money. He's going to drink it." Well, he went there and came back and he never touched a drink after, never. He wanted my brother and I to join. My brother joined. I didn't. I said, "Pepere, what if I want to drink someday. What if I want to have a drink. "Yeah but you can't. You're gonna...you're gonna." He was really after me to join. I never did. My father belonged, my grandfather did. But he never drank after that. Can't Leave Alcohol Alone. And that's what it says: CLAA, on the blue button. That touched me, when my grandfather stopped drinking. But I refused to be pushed into it. My brother went.

Another thing, I told you about my brother singing. My brother died young. You know that? A diabetic. At 12 years old, they discovered he was diabetic. He didn't die at 12 years old. He died at 28 years old.

NMS: That's still very young.

BC: Oh yeah. Yeah. Yeah. He was my best man at the wedding, my first one. It was tough for him. I'd go into the Puritan and he was sitting there, he'd have a big sundae with chocolate sauce and the whole bit. I'd want to say to him, "Don't!" And he knew it. His friends were doing it and he was eating too. It was too bad. He wanted to play sports too and he couldn't. That was difficult for him, you know.

NMS: Did he end up going to school or college?

BC: He didn't go to college. He went to high school and graduated from high school. He didn't go to college. He bought me my college ring.

NMS: That must have been meaningful

BC: I still have it!

NMS: Sounds like you've been surrounded by a very loving family.

BC: Oh yeah. My grandfather was...Now here comes my second son, John

NMS: We are going to stop now.

