

# Kansas Oral History Project

The Kansas Oral History Project (KOHP) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation founded in 2016 to conduct, archive, and make available to the public oral history interviews of Kansans involved in public service. The corporation was formed after a years-long effort that started with the concept of oral histories of legislators who served during a period of great change in state government.

In 2002 after Dr. Ramon Powers retired as Executive Director of the Kansas State Historical Society, he and Professor Bob Beatty, of Washburn University in Topeka, presented to the Kansas Legislature the idea of creating an oral history collection of the reflections of Kansans who were involved in shaping public policy during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Powers and Beatty hoped to gain legislative support for the project and an appropriation to begin the effort. They presented their concept to the Kansas House of Representatives' Interim Committee on Arts and Cultural Resources in 2006. The Committee recommended funding for an oral history program, but the Legislature did not appropriate the funds.

Subsequently, Powers and Dr. Burdett Loomis (1945-2021), then KU Professor of Political Science, sought and received funding from the Kansas Humanities Council (the predecessor to Humanities Kansas) to fund the interviews of ten former legislators. The Shawnee County Historical Society provided project direction and Loomis conducted the interviews in 2014 and 2015. At that time, former Kansas House of Representatives members Joan Wagon (Topeka) and David Heinemann (Garden City) were active with the Society and became involved in the project.

When he learned about the effort to collect oral histories of legislators, former Representative Sandy Duncan (Wichita), who lived in Texas at the time, offered his assistance in creating a non-profit entity to further the project. Working with Duncan, Powers, Wagon, and Heinemann secured incorporation of the Kansas Oral History Project, Inc. The founding officers were former House member Jim Maag, President; Professor and author Jim Hoy, Vice-President; former State Archivist Pat Michaelis, Treasurer; and Powers, Secretary. In addition to the officers, the first board included former legislators Heinemann and Wagon, community leaders Norma Hoagland and Kathleen Holt, and history professor Jay Price. In 2020 the board expanded to 15 members. As a 'working board' creating a growing collection, more members were necessary to accomplish necessary tasks.

One of the early decisions of the initial board was to create both video and audio recordings along with professionally prepared transcripts for each oral history interview. The Board also entered into an agreement with the Kansas Historical Society Museum to permanently house the recordings and transcripts.

In 2017 Dr. Ed Flentje, Professor Emeritus at Wichita State University, began a series of interviews of Kansas legislative leaders. Professor Flentje also started the KOHP

governors collection by interviewing former governors Mike Hayden and John Carlin in 2018 and 2019, respectively. In 2019, Dale Goter and Jim McLean interviewed ten additional former legislators. Goter and McLean were familiar with the interviewees and the issues from their time as statehouse reporters.

During 2019 and 2020 KOHP interviewed women who had served in the legislature in the 1990s. The former women legislators were previously interviewed for an oral history collection created by Washburn faculty when the legislators were in office.

The interviews of former legislators comprise the largest of the KOHP collections and former legislators continue to be an important element of KOHP's ongoing work. However, the content and focus of interviews expanded beyond former legislators in 2019 with the creation of an oral history collection exploring water policy development and implementation from the 1970s into the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Rex Buchanan, Director Emeritus of the Kansas Geological Survey, conducted 15 interviews of Kansans involved with and impacted by water policy ranging from former Governor Mike Hayden to irrigators and natural resource lobbyists.

Interviews with other non-legislators were added in 2020. Those interviews include former Attorney General Bob Steffen (1933-2923), former U.S. Senator Nancy Landon Kassebaum, former Kansas Secretary of Commerce Gary Sherrer, former Deputy Commissioner of Education Dale Dennis, and former State Corporation Commissioner and State Fire Marshall Jack Alexander.

The Project's collections have expanded to encompass subject matter-specific interviews: Kansas Courts and the Rule of Law (collection started in 2021), Diverse Voices in Public Policy (collection started in 2022), and Energy & Environment (collection started in 2023). Moving away, to some extent, from policy makers, the scope of the oral histories in the Energy & Environment collection includes interviews with practitioners in the energy industry including executives in the electric utility and oil and gas sectors. The tie to public policy, however, is retained in the observations of those interviewees about the impact of state and national policies on their industries.

To ensure broad access to KOHP's growing collections, a website, [www.KsOralHistory.org](http://www.KsOralHistory.org), was launched in 2021. The website houses not only the interviews conducted by Loomis and KOHP but also related oral histories conducted by historians Loren Pennington and Janice Huston from Emporia. All the recordings and transcripts are available to the public without charge. The website is designed to aid researchers and other members of the public by having a well-designed search function.

Also, in 2021 KOHP committed to developing civic education material from the oral histories it had collected. Working with experienced history and social studies educators and the Kansas Department of Education, the Resources for Educators section of the website houses lesson plans, video clips from the interviews, and other related resources for easy access by teachers at all levels.