

Interview with Jack Alexander by Mike Lennen, October 26, 2020
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Mike Lennen: Hi, my name is Mike Lennen. Today is October 26, 2020, and we're in Topeka to conduct an interview with Jack Alexander that will become a part of the Kansas Oral History Project series. The Kansas Oral History Project itself is a nonprofit corporation. It was created to collect and preserve oral histories of Kansans who were involved in shaping and implementing public policy in Kansas in the latter half of the 20th century. Recordings and transcripts of these oral history interviews are accessible to researchers, to educators, and to the general public through the Kansas Historical Society and the State Library of Kansas.

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Jack Alexander is a native Kansan and nearly a lifelong Topekan. He has held a number of major positions in local and Kansas government. He's established an extensive record of civic and public service. In the course of this service, Jack has achieved a number of firsts. Included among them was his election as the first African American to serve on the Topeka City Commission. he was elected Topeka Water Commissioner on a citywide basis in 1973 and service in that capacity until 1985, having been re-elected twice. For ten years of that period, he was also selected by fellow Topeka commissioners to be president of the City Commission.

After leaving the Commission, Jack joined the Kansas Department of Health and Environment as Director of Permits Enforcement and Compliance, which was part of the Water Protection Bureau. That was a position he held from 1985 through 1990. Then in 1991, Jack was appointed by Governor Finney to the Kansas Corporation Commission. Again, another first. He became the first African American to serve in that capacity, and he was a KCC member from 1991 into 1996.

Jack's record of service to the country, the community, and the state is lengthy. He joined and served in the US Navy from 1952 to 1956. He was a board member of the League of Kansas Municipalities from 1973 to 1985 and was elected president of the League in 1982. He was a member of the Kansas Water Authority from its inception in 1981 into 1985, and additionally he served as Board President of the Shawnee County Community Assistance and Action Agency, Vice President of the Topeka chapter of the NAACP, Vice President of the Topeka United Way.

Jack was also appointed to be the state Fire Marshall by Governor Sebelius in 2004, and he retired from that position and from state government permanently in 2007. There were a host of other organizations that Jack served. We may well mention some of them in the course of the interview this afternoon. But I'd be remiss if I failed to acknowledge his long-term employment at the Topeka Goodyear plant, where he was active in the Rubber Workers Union, Local 307. It was that association with the union that was a major factor in his ultimate decision to declare his candidacy, which resulted in his election to the Water Commissioner's Office in 1973.

So, Jack, with that, good afternoon.

Jack Alexander: Are we through, Michael?

ML: We are through with this.

JA: It sounds like all I did was own a great big box of chapstick.

ML: It's an exceedingly impressive record, Jack.

JA: Well, thank you. You're very kind. I'm deeply honored to really be here today. It's something that I don't think that I ever would have imagined in my lifetime that I would have been doing and a lot of the things that I've done. But before we get into any of the particulars, I think the thing was that the community was active. I enjoyed people and being around what was going on, and, consequently, you get involved in a lot of things that you normally wouldn't have gotten involved in. That's been a blessing. I've loved every day of it, let me say that for sure.

ML: I'm certainly grateful of your willingness to agree to contribute to this series. It does provide an important insight into what was happening.

JA: I think before we go too much further, I think it also ought to be recognized that you had a great hand in helping start the political side of my side.

ML: That's very kind of you to say, but it was really the candidate who had responsibility for that.

JA: I can remember a lot of the fond stories relative to that candidacy. Believe me, yourself, Terry Watson, Paul Pendergast, Jerry Shelor, and certainly all my buddies at Goodyear, starting with George Amis, they're the ones that said, "We can do this."

ML: They knew they had a good candidate, a good person for that position. Jack, we might just start with a look at the early years. I'll open with a multi-part question. When and where were you born, and when did you become a Topekan?

JA: I was born in the huge great big city in Kansas called Iola, down in southeast Kansas. I was born there. At the time that I was born, my dad had already moved to Topeka. He had a brother that was previously here. My dad had come to Topeka to take a job.

Shortly after, and I can't tell you when, but shortly after I was born, we did move to Topeka. We've been in Topeka ever since. While born in Iola, I'm a native Topekan.

ML: A native Topekan, by virtue of just a few months being in Iola.

JA: Showing up!

ML: Jack, your mom died when you were quite young. Your father remarried. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the influence of your father and your stepmother on your upbringing.

JA: My stepmother was nicknamed, I forget from whom, but her name was Mary Elizabeth, but we nicknamed her Angel, and she was.

ML: She was known as Angel?

JA: She was known as Angel, and she was an angel. She had previously been married herself, had a daughter older than I, but through that whole life span, there was no difference ever made between any of us. I had two brothers and a sister. We all were one family.

My dad was a great guy. My dad was a super guy. He taught me so many great things in life. I have always said I'm glad that I never had to make a choice between my dad and my stepmom because my stepmom was just that good. I looked at my dad as being a disciplinarian quite a bit of the time. I wasn't the best kid in the world. He whopped the tar out of you quite a bit, and before he was out of sight, you'd be back doing whatever it is you just got whipped for.

My mom would take you in. Angel would take you in and set you on a chair. You might sit there all day. Every time she passed that chair, you'd get a lecture. You'd get a lecture. She never put a hand on you, but she'd beat you to death, trying to get you to see right from wrong. She was a sweetheart. To the day that she expired, I had been with her the night before, and I'm talking about my stepmother now, I'd been with Angel. I used to tease her quite a bit when I would go to her room. She was in a health facility. I would ask her, "Do you know who I am?" and she'd look at me. I'd say, "What's my name?" She'd say, "You know I can't tell you what your name is, but I know who you are. You're my son." That was the way she would leave me every day.

ML: That's really an important and moving story, I think.

JA: Back to my birth mother. I knew a little bit about her. I was about eight or nine when she died. The remembrance were just kind of family kind of things, going to Lola, doing things with her. I don't think at that point in time, I had really learned how to love her, that I could now express what I felt at that time. But she was a gorgeous lady. She just died of breast cancer. She's just still a fond memory of mine.

ML: You had some wonderful influences in your upbringing.

JA: I did. We can talk about where I ended up. A lot of that started right there. We can talk about children that don't have but one parent or no parents. I'd come along at a time when everybody up and down the street was almost your parent. I was almost as scared at school when I got in trouble because by the time I got home, I was already beat up.

ML: That sort of brings me to the next question. What part of town did you live in?

JA: I think all of our life has been on the east side, going clear back to the youth. We moved around quite a bit on the east side. When I say "east side," I'm talking about east of the Shunga Creek, south of 10th Street, running down to 15th or 17th Street, then going east actually Locust, Lafayette, somewhere in that corridor. We had lived inside of that corridor at three or four different houses, but also sort of right there in that general area. In that particular area also, Mike, was where Washington Grade School was located. I can remember we lived at one point just a block from Washington Grade School. Back to my stepmother for a moment. When we were with her, we were at 908 Wood Street, which was only three blocks from Washington School. But that was sort of the area that I grew up in.

ML: Thinking about the area physically, was it mostly residential? Was it sort of a vibrant area? Did they have businesses, churches?

JA: I would say mostly residential, but again those were during the times when a lot of the neighborhoods, we had two or three grocery stores within that area. I can remember, we had one drugstore, and there were black-owned places at that time, the drugstore in that area, and any number of churches and denominations of churches within that area. But the area was heavily residential, and like I mentioned a bit ago, Washington School was in the area, and even some of the teachers from the school actually lived there in that area.

ML: You've mentioned the Washington Elementary School, the Washington Grade School. This was in the pre-Brown era. I think you were born in late 1930, is that right?

JA: Yes. That makes me a super old man.

ML: I'm gaining on you. Let me ask you. Was Washington Grade School integrated or segregated?

JA: It was segregated. When you think about the area, all around, if we moved outside of, say, the area that I lived in, which at that time was the East Topeka area, if you moved to the east, you got into sort of the Monroe School area, which was again another black kind of growing area, and the same way if you moved a little further to the east.

But Washington was segregated. I still enjoy telling all of my white friends that I still get to meet with that I had a much better grade school education than any of them ever had. The teachers that taught me couldn't do anything but be teachers. They couldn't aspire to be an administrator or in some of the other levels of education because that was pre-Brown. But it was a great school. When I think back, school lunches now. I can recall when at Washington, we had what they called a health room at that time, where some of the disadvantaged kids in the neighborhood could have breakfast and lunch at school, sort of what's going on today.

ML: They were ahead of its time.

JA: Yes. It was a great environment. The other thing, Mike, a lot of my family, as you recall I said my dad had come to Topeka before I was born. My dad and several of his brothers all worked for the Board of Education in different schools and what have you. There was that familiarity with what was going on that was handed down even to us. We'd be following them around, helping do this, helping do that. There was a great learning experience. But Washington had I think a great deal in getting me headed towards the right track.

ML: Jack, during the time of the Great Depression, you were just a kid. It started at the time you were born and ended when you were ten or eleven. Let me ask if you had any particular recollections of that or how it may have affected your family or that area of town where you were living.

JA: While I may not have too many remembrances of it, I do recall a lot of the sharing that went on within the neighborhoods. If somebody had something, somebody else could have a part of it. Like I say, my dad and those guys worked for the Board. A lot of times when they would have like social functions or different party kinds of things, there would be those leftovers that they could have and bring home and that kind of thing. While things were bad, I don't think we had it that bad.

ML: Moving on from that period to junior high school, you went to East Topeka Junior High?

JA: I went to East Topeka Junior High School.

ML: And East Topeka was integrated, is that right?

JA: It was integrated.

ML: Can you share some of the differences of going to school there in an integrated setting versus Washington?

JA: Let me first go back to Washington for just a minute. Like I say, I grew up on Wood Street. Wood Street is one block south of 10th, between Chandler and Branner. Parkdale Grade School, which is a white school, was one-half block on the east side of Chandler Street. So I grew up a half a block from a school.

Now I must say I never even considered why I couldn't go to that school. All the kids in my neighborhood and everybody that I knew were going to Washington. I just automatically gravitated to school there. I never gave that other school a thought, even though all summer, the kids out of that school, the kids out of Washington, some of the other neighborhood schools, all played in what we called Chandler Field, which is setting over there today, which was just a melting pot at that particular time.

Or let me move back over to East Topeka for just a moment. East Topeka was integrated. The principal was a guy by the name of Phil Olyer. Phil Olyer really had a lasting impression on me in how he handled whatever that integration thing was at East Topeka. I can recall if you got into trouble, of course, paddling was permitted during those times. If Phil had to take you to the office and paddle you for something, within the next twenty-four hours, he would find you in study hall, and he'd tap you on the shoulder and say, "Jack, come on. I think I can beat you in playing a game of ping pong." He'd take you down to the ping pong room and put those pieces back together. He never allowed his having-to-do job, his punishment job, to put a wall between you and he. He was a fine guy.

Athletics, a lot of us kids grew up being athletes. He'd talk you to the gym, and he'd guarantee you—he was a little short, heavysset guy. He looked like a little snowman. He'd guarantee you he could make more free throws than you, and he could. But that was kind of his relationship with we guys and gals that come out of this ghetto-type area.

But in East Topeka, as far as the classes, the education, and getting along, it was a good homogenous mix. Again, just moving north of 10th Street, you started to have the white areas. Go a little bit further and spread out just a little bit, not getting into Oakland, but you spread out a little bit, and you picked up a lot of the Hispanic.

At East Topeka, we were pretty well homogeneously mixed. It was a great association. Athletics, we all competed on the team together, against each other. At that time, I think it was six junior high schools in town. We competed against those, even those such as maybe a Roosevelt, which didn't have many black students. Boswell had a few. Holliday didn't have many, but they had a lot of Hispanic students. Most of the black students were primarily at East Topeka and Crane. Crane was down by the fairgrounds down on 17th Street.

ML: So moving from East Topeka to Topeka High, again that's integrated. What significant changes come to mind that you experienced in making that move?

JA: You know, I don't think we had any major, major kinds of problems of going to Topeka High. It was a different setting. Maybe the junior high schools helped because those of us that were athletes, we knew different people that came from these other schools in that same grade. But my remembrance of time at Topeka High was all good. We had no problem classroom-wise.

Getting into the social activities, there were great changes in the school social activities. But as far as dealing with just the curriculum and teachers and in and out of school—I can't ever recall any kind of mistreatment from teachers just simply because we came from East Topeka or our color. I just thought we had a good experience there.

But when you get into the athletic thing, then that whole thing shifted.

ML: I was going to ask about that.

JA: We can get to that when you want to.

ML: Let's go ahead with the Ramblers, if you want to talk about that.

JA: Part of it, and I want to go back to junior high school for just a minute. Like I said, my dad and several of his brothers all worked for 501. The Ramblers practiced and played their games at East Topeka Junior High School, which was a very nice gym, a pretty new school during that period of time. For practices and all of those things, my dad would be opening up the gym and at the gym.

I grew up—I was a gym rat and behind those Ramblers. To be just gut honest, when I left East Topeka, going to Topeka High, I didn't know what a Trojan was. All I wanted to be was a Rambler. Yet still when you stop and think about it, the Trojan football team practiced one half block there from my house, right there in Chandler Field.

Anyway, let's talk about the Ramblers a minute. The Ramblers were actually the second Black basketball team at Topeka High School. The first one was called the Cardinals. It had been started by a principal of McKinley School, which is in North Topeka. Some guys over there wanted to play some ball. They couldn't—integration was out as far as the school. That started that Cardinal team. They put together a team and worked with some of the school officials who helped get it going. They had a little league going, and that lasted a while.

Then I think the Ramblers came into being about 1939, somewhere in that neighborhood. While things were still the same, there was a different recognition. This team now, they called it the Topeka Ramblers, even though we were Trojans. But, for instance, when we traveled, we traveled by bus. I'm talking about the Ramblers. Prior to that, I'd heard stories of where they had to travel by cars and that kind of things, but we traveled by bus. We stayed primarily in either black-owned facilities or with black families, and the same way with eating, either a black restaurant, or the school, or that kind of thing. We had uniforms. We had the whole bit.

ML: Were you playing black teams?

JA: We were playing all-black teams, yes.

ML: Where were those schools that you were going?

JA: Lawrence had a black team. Leavenworth had a black team. St. Joe, Missouri had a black team. Kansas City had two. They had R. T. Coles and another school there. That was sort of the league. I forget the name of the league, but that was sort of the league.

Then at the start of the basketball season, we would take like a four- or five-day trip and go down in southeast Kansas and play Independence, Fort Scott, and Parsons. We would go on a trip and play those three teams.

ML: Did the Ramblers have cheerleaders?

JA: We had cheerleaders. While we're talking about cheerleaders, I would like to mention that one of our cheerleaders, the gentleman that was on the '49 cheering team, and there's a picture of him in the magazine, the United States is now building a ship in his honor, a gentleman by the name of Frank Peterson. He was cheerleader for the Ramblers.

But, again, Mike, we had the same things that, to the best of my knowledge, that the white team had. There used to be things around the school about the swimming pool and that kind of thing. But even a poor white kid didn't know anything about swimming pools or playing golf. We all grew up playing football and baseball and basketball. For me, that was probably the hurt, just like in one of the things, and we'll probably get to that later on. I know that Dean Smith had a great deal of pain about us having those two basketball teams.

ML: You ultimately were captain of the Ramblers. You must have been a good player.

JA: I was a decent ball player. In fact, after Mr. Ross, who was our last coach, I'd see him, we'd be in a store somewhere around town. He'd lost his eyesight by then. I may speak and say, "Hi, Mike," and you'd hear his voice. He'd say, "There's my little guard. There's Jack." He just had that recognition.

Patting myself on the back, I was a good—but, again, I grew up in that gym, learning those skills. I may have been ahead of the kids just a little bit. But, yes, I was captain of the last—I guess I put that one to bed, didn't I?

ML: You did. Maybe with Dean Smith. Is that right?

JA: I lettered all three years. I was bound to be a Rambler.

ML: Talk about Dean Smith's role.

JA: Dean was one of the nicest, nicest individuals that I think you ever met. I don't care—he was so humble, so humble. His desire was to get the best out of anybody. His comment when we were having a little discussion at Topeka High with the principal about the integration of the teams, his comment was—not at that moment, but afterward, "Yes, I'm very concerned about social justice, but I also want to win some more basketball games." You really had to know Dean. That was him. We would have our class parties. He'd sneak in, want to sit out of sight, sit with you over in the corner. He just didn't want the recognition that he was due. Just a wonderful, wonderful guy.

ML: Jack, you graduated from high school in 1949. You went into the US Navy in 1952, I believe that's right. You attended Washburn in that period, and then also you took a job at Goodyear.

JA: Right.

ML: Do you want to talk just a little bit about your experience at Washburn?

JA: Okay. I had a grand experience at Washburn. I enjoyed school at that time because I realized that school was going to help me later on. I think the problem arose with school is that a lot of the guys now are leaving school, going into the service. One of the big emphasizes for me of even thinking about that was the same guy I talked to you about a little bit earlier, Buddy Peterson. He and I were very close friends. He had joined the Navy, had been transferred to the Marine Corps, become a pilot, and history run off with it from there. He always talked to me about the military.

Also while at Washburn, I was in the AROTC. Of course, I'm a young man now. These ladies are bothering me, and all those other kinds of things, and I'm working. I don't know. Things just started crowding down, and I decide, "Maybe I need to join the service."

I went and talked with my professors, the AROTC professors. They didn't want to see me leave school, but they told me, "What we can do is we can get you into Officers Candidate School by nature of your time in AROTC." That propped me up again until I found out where I was going. I was going to Biloxi, Mississippi. 1952, Jack Alexander as radical as he was at that time, going to Biloxi, Mississippi? I wasn't worried about what Biloxi was going to do to me. I was worried about what I was going to do to Biloxi.

Anyway, I did not go. That's when I joined the Navy. I joined the Navy, and I go back to Peterson again. His dad had an electronics shop. I'd spent a lot of time, Buddy and I, working there, tinkering with electronics. When I went into the Navy and took tests and graduated boot camp, you go in the building, and you've got your name on the wall, and you find out what your next duty station was. I was going to something called—oh, boy, I'm losing the term. Anyway, to make a long story short, what it was was just being a sophisticated warehouse man.

I've met tons of great people in my life, tons of great people. My chief at that time was one of those. I asked him, I said, "Don't they look at our credentials when we come in?" He said, "Oh, yes, Jack, they do." I said, "I've got a background in electronics, and here I'm going to storekeeping school." He said, "Jack, don't fuss about that." He said, "You'll be one of the earlier Blacks that get to go to that kind of school."

Of course, I'm always one to shoot off my mouth. So I had to continue the conversation. I said, "But, Chief, what you're telling me is I could get killed taking care of the stores on your ship, but I can't get killed in the communication room." He thought about it, and then he said, "Yes,

that's what I'm telling you." I said, "I tell you what, Chief." I said, "If I could take a communications test, if I don't finish in the top 3 percent, I don't care how many people or how few take it, I'll be the best damn storekeeper that the United States Navy ever had."

I couldn't kick the door down. He kicked the door down. I took the test. I spent my four years in the Navy in Communications. To my dying day, I have to give him the credit. I had the skills, but I couldn't get through that door.

The other thing that I will take to my grave about that conversation was when I was talking about getting killed on the ship, he said, "Jack, this is 1952." He said, "The military was just desegregated in 1948." He said, "The United States Navy doesn't know it yet." True words from him.

ML: You were in the Navy from '52 to '56.

JA: A lot of good Navy stories, a wonderful ship. I was aboard the USS President Jackson, which is a troop transport APA 18. Our home port was Oakland Army base in Oakland, California. We'd make two runs from Oakland to Hawaii, and come back. We'd make a run from Oakland up north through the northern tier, come back. Then we'd make a run to Yokohama and start that all over again.

Well, back to Communications a moment. I've been smart and outsmarted myself a lot of times. Orders would come in to transfer a radio man to Rio de Janeiro; Rome; Naples, Italy—all these fabulous places where they needed a Communications person. I was transferring the least senior person that I had until one day we were at sea, and I'm sitting there, copying away, and the orders come across, and it said, "Send FS Jack Alexander 3450867 to Nav Com State Guam."

I spent my last year and a half on Guam. But Guam wasn't bad, a beautiful island, and the Japanese were just building things up over there, but I got to play against the Yankees. I was also a baseball player. I got to play against the Yankees in '55.

ML: In Guam?

JA: In Guam. They were on their way to Japan. They had an All Star team. We played them. So my Navy career, I enjoyed. Of course, I was able to by that time—we haven't talked about my family, but while I was aboard ship, my family, we started out living in San Diego. Then we moved up to Concord, California, which is right outside of Berkeley. That's where they spent their time. The Naval career was fine, no complaints.

ML: And you got out in '56, and then came from Oakland back to Topeka.

JA: '56, and during that time, things out there on the coast were pretty heated. A lot of rumblings were going on. I hadn't been back here in quite some time. The other thing was that I

knew when I left here, left Topeka, that I had taken leave of absence from my job. So I knew I had a job here, if I wanted to come back. I'm sure that weighed in. Anyway, I came back to Topeka and went back to work for Goodyear.

ML: And you mentioned your family. Family considerations was certainly one important thing that brought you back.

JA: It did. By that time, I've got three kids by then. Having lived on Guam and now coming back to Oakland, my roots just weren't long enough in Oakland at that time. I'm sure that helped me move me on back this way.

ML: One of the things I want to ask about before getting into the employment at Goodyear. Topeka had launched an urban renewal program in the late 1950s, really about the time that you were getting back in '56, '57. I'd sort of like to get your perspective on that, what part of town it was in, what influence it had.

JA: I think the biggest influence that I recall that urban renewal had for certainly the Black community was we had an area probably from 4th Street down to 1st Street, let's say, Kansas Avenue down to almost to Branner. That was pretty well a densely populated—restaurants, bars, nightclubs, churches area. It was just sort of an entertainment-like district. I've seen James Brown. I've seen Louis Jordan, a lot of the entertainers. Of course, the entertainers during that period of time, a lot of them traveled by bus between Denver and Kansas City, Oklahoma City, and Omaha. The promoters here could always pull them in there.

Urban renewal really killed all of that, and part of the problem was ours because we didn't own any of the buildings. When they started to eliminate things, people were just out of business. There's one business today over at 6th and Lake that was in existence during that period of time, right down there on the corner of 4th and Quincy. I'm losing the name of it. It's a hamburger business, a lot of food, but it never had even then. It was an old abandoned filling station. Even then it did not have eating area, seats, just as it doesn't have today, but it's in existence right now, right over next door to the Salvation Army.

ML: It would be fair to say that that's had a lasting—

JA: That was a White business. Now I'm sure it's the third generation of family that are still running that business, the Happy Shack or Party Shack or something to that name. It's in existence right today.

During that time, we had Black hotels down there. We had Black drugstores. We had Black restaurants. We just had a little over everything. It was a gathering place. Then, of course, urban renewal dispersed that. A lot of it just went out.

ML: It just sort of decimated that area. Would you say it still hasn't come back?

JA: It still hasn't come back.

ML: One other thing I want to ask about is your association with the Shawnee County Community Assistance in Action Agency.

JA: That was an interesting—again, I'm kind of lost for dates, but that was an OEO program, an Office of Economic Opportunity program. I went aboard their board, representing the NAACP. The name of the board at that time EOBOSC, Economic Opportunity Board of Shawnee County, or something to that effect.

I hadn't been aboard there too long before it was defunded. The whole operation was defunded. The feds defunded the whole thing. A number of us decided that people were being hurt by the defunding. Even though there was probably reasons that it should have been defunded, the residue of people needing the services weren't getting taken care of.

So we got back into the fight. We were able to rattle with them and get their attention. We did have several meetings with them. McCormick was around by that time.

ML: Mayor McCormick?

JA: Mayor McCormick. He was very instrumental. They decided they'd give us a hearing, OEO did. The gentleman that represented our board at the time was some guy by the name of Charles Scott. Anyway, to make a long story short, we were able to get it refunded and started up. A lot of the operational rules changed for the better. It's still in existence today, serving just tons of people. I think I've just come off that board, probably five or six years ago.

ML: You served as board president for a time.

JA: I served as board president for a long, long time. I felt obligated to try to do something at that time because I went aboard to help, and it seemed like right after I got there, the whole thing was gone. But there were a number of good people there that we all got together, and we did get a meeting with the OEO people, and we were able to get it started again, and it exists today.

ML: Let's go from there to your employment at Goodyear and your participation with the Local 307, the Rubber Workers.

JA: I've done a lot of things in my life, but I really enjoyed working at Goodyear, not the work per se, but there were just wonderful, wonderful people employed there. A lot of these people came from all these little rural towns around Topeka. I got involved with the local union, 307, and I chaired their Political Action Committee. We were helping candidates and doing all of the political kinds of things.

During this period of time, cable TV had just started up here in Topeka. Somehow, some of the sitting commissioners had got entangled with give and take with these new companies coming in. Some of them either resigned or were going to be put out.

My union at that time, 307, was probably—we were the strongest union around in this area, primarily for the size of people and moneys that we had with the Goodyear plant. But we were also fighting with all of the craft unions. We had a leg up on them because most of the craft unions didn't have any Black people in them.

To make a long story short, when this thing happened at the City Commission, and these positions came open—I think it was two positions, my union buddy said to me, “Jack, we're going to submit your name to fill one of these positions.” These are guys I worked with every day. I think we're just going along, kidding along. I'm in agreement, “Okay, yeah.”

Well, they were serious. To make a long story short, once my name had got thrown out there, a lot of the craft unions got a little bit upset because they weren't strong enough to overpower 307, but yet still they weren't wanting to go along with me. So what finally happened is whatever the City made up their mind was that whoever got the position, the appointed position that they were going to fill, could not run at the next election.

ML: That would have happened at about 1971 or '72.

JA: Right, about that time. My union president, George Amis said—they didn't go along with that. They told the City, “You're going to have to make your own decision. If that's your decision, we'll see you in the spring.” That's where that campaign started to get started. The gentleman that ended up in the seat that I was being nominated for was a former mayor by the name of Hal Gerlach.

ML: But he couldn't run for re-election.

JA: No, he couldn't run. That's some of the give and take I'm sure that the City had on putting their thing together. Anyway, from that day forward, my union buddies said, “Let's get busy. We're going to get involved in this.” You know as much as that background as I do. They turned over the top floor of their union hall to my wife and Bob Lawson and said, “Let's get going,” and away we went.

While I've been involved in a lot of things, that was a wonderful, wonderful experience because of the number of people that it involved.

ML: I was going to mention. You may recall, this may have been your only ad.

JA: That was the only ad we had.

ML: This full-page ad in the Topeka Capital Journal.

JA: We didn't have any money.

ML: And here almost 400 people all paid to be endorsing you.

JA: One name in there, had I saved his \$5 check, I probably would be a rich man today.

ML: That would be Topeka's most prominent citizen probably. That was?

JA: Mr. Alf Landon. I can recall the visit that you guys sent me to talk to him that day. We had a nice visit. I got ready to leave, and he said, "You know, I've never endorsed candidates before." I got up and thanked him. I almost got to the door, and he said, "Young man, come back and sit down." I went back and sat down. He said, "You know, I'm getting pretty old. It's time I change."

Not only did Alf endorse me, he wrote out his little \$5 check, and after election, I would have lunch at least one time a week with he and Andy Gray. I get phone calls from him all the time. He was really an interesting, interesting person, and I still spend time now with his grandson and with Nancy.

ML: That's a great story. Just sort of following up on this ad, one of the things that sort of struck me about it, besides everybody paying to have their name on it was just how diverse this group of people is. There were Republican and Democratic state representatives, Republican and Democratic business leaders, labor leaders, across ideological lines, generational lines, ethnic lines, all of those things. So I guess I'm asking for a bit of reflection—

JA: When you look at that list, you say, "He was always meddling with somebody."

ML: I'm going to ask it in a different way. how did you put the coalition together that was so diverse to create such confidence and trust?

JA: Again, I've always enjoyed people. I've always enjoyed working with different groups and working with different things. Many of those people in that list some place in a period of time we had rubbed shoulders together, doing things, whether it was on a committee assignment or volunteering for something. There's a number of people on there from the Martin Tractor thing. That started out as someone out there wanted to run for the school board one time, and we were helping him do that.

Well, all of those coalitions finally came together, and the interesting thing was that some of the people in there, let's say school teachers, some of the school teachers would go around and

find out, "Do you know Jack?" This, that, and the other, and help because we didn't have any money. This was the money. That generated the money.

ML: It's a tribute to you that you were able to put together that sort of coalition, and you won by a large margin as well when the election came around.

JA: Yes.

ML: Let me ask about the responsibilities of being Water Commissioner once you were elected. What were the daily things you did? How did the City make decisions with different Commissioners?

JA: I particularly liked working for the Commission. I particularly liked being Water Commissioner. The one thing that I particularly liked about being Water Commissioner during that period of time after I was there was I learned that the Water Department was run totally on revenues. It was not dependent upon tax dollars. But as one-fifth of the City Commission, you had to run on different taxing things that went on. We would be able to do our projects. We were able to borrow money. We were able to do certain deals within the department so that we could at least keep some money as well as the development of the infrastructure that had to take place.

I certainly wasn't the engineer or the planner, but I had the last say on whatever we'd done. Let me say this. In all the jobs that I have ever had, I have had such wonderful people to work with. I say that holistically because things that I don't know or didn't know, they felt comfortable in coming in and saying, "Commissioner, thus and so, thus and so." I had the belief that they were giving me the straight skinny.

The political side of the job, I could deal with that. That was the other four commissioners, which was a treat within itself. Politics is nothing but a numbers game. We're about who's got the odd number. I didn't have any number of going and calling one of them guys down to my office and tell them how the hog ate the cabbage. I couldn't do it up in public because some of the things I said shouldn't be said in public, but I had a good relationship with them.

I was on the Commission twelve years. I was President of the Commission ten of those twelve years. The two years that I was not President, there was a gentleman that had been on the Commission all that period of time by the name of Charles Campbell. He was running for his last time. He wasn't going to run anymore. I talked the other commissioners into supporting him to be Chair of the Commission on his last term.

Now that was then. Let me go back to the first term. A cute story for you. After the election, we had to vote. I won the vote 4 to 1. There was a gentleman by the name of Terry Watson that was just visibly upset. "Find out which one of those SOBs voted against you." He kept talking to

me and talking to me, "I'm going to find out. I'm going to find out." I finally had to tell him which one it was. Do you know who voted against me?

ML: I'm guessing it was the Water Commissioner Alexander.

JA: It was the Water Commissioner Alexander. It was the last time I have not voted for myself.

ML: What sort of extra things did you get to do as President?

JA: Those extra duties I really enjoyed during that time. If you recall, if any of you knew Bill McCormick, Bill McCormick was a very carefree—and I don't mean this on a negative—but Bill liked to walk around and look at buildings and ride his bicycle and have a beer with the American Legion. He didn't care that much about doing the government work.

For instance, whenever the Chamber had something going and needed the Mayor, I had to be there because Bill wasn't going. That was part of—I enjoyed those duties. That helped fill out some of that because some of those same people were there. That was primarily the job of the President of the Commission was acting as the Mayor when the Mayor wasn't—whether he was at a Commission meeting or traveling. Bill didn't like traveling.

ML: So, for sure some extra added duties.

JA: They were, and they were fun duties. Bill and I were great friends. I could do it and feel very comfortable in whatever the outcome was. I can recall meeting dignitaries from overseas. Bill would be standing out there on the street corner somewhere, looking up and down the street. That was just him, just his way. A brilliant guy, a brilliant guy.

ML: While you were Water Commissioner, you were elected president at the League of Kansas Municipalities in 1982. How did that come about? That's a statewide organization.

JA: Again, I had represented the City of Topeka on that board, on the Municipalities Board, and just like everything else, I was there. So I'd get right into the middle of everything, I guess during that period of time of raising hell on the board, people thought maybe I could be the Chair of the board. It was a great experience. It's all kinds of activities and cities that blend in because of that Kansas League of Municipalities.

And I had the world's greatest teacher, and I just lost his name. He lived over on College. I'll think of it before we're through, Ernie Mosher, the world's greatest teacher. Ernie Mosher.

ML: Did you discern any differences in urban and rural approaches to issues?

JA: There were issues. Even the rural activities and the rural individuals that we dealt with during that period of time were so open to communications. I talk a lot, but I'm also a good

listener. We were able to do things that assisted the smaller communities, even if it was getting some of the expertise out of some of the bigger places that could go out and lend them a hand in helping them plan this or do that. There was always a great working relationship there.

ML: When you left the City Commission, you went to the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. The secretary at that time I think was Barbara Sabol. It was during Governor Carlin's term in 1985. You served right through Governor Hayden's term as well until 1990. Did you detect any differences in approach to enforcement?

JA: I did not really, Mike, because—and I really enjoyed that period of work because again I was outside of the City of Topeka a lot, doing things with a lot of the communities in and around the city. I can recall a lot of the hearings that I would have to hold. Sometimes it would get kind of tough when you had to render bad decisions, but I did not see any difference between either one of those administrations from the point of view that we had at H & E at that time. Things just were moving along real well. Back to staff people again, those were some treasured staff people working in those different situations.

ML: In the 1990 election, Joan Finney won the governor's race. In 1991, then you became the Senate or legislative liaison for Governor Finney. Could you talk about your relationship with her and how that connection developed?

JA: Such a wonderful, wonderful individual, person, Joan Finney. While I was Water Commissioner, Joan Finney happened to be administrative assistant to Bill McCormick. So that goes back to that. Just a little bit prior to that, she held a couple of the state offices. So that was kind of my earlier ties with her.

When she was elected governor, I don't remember the lady's name now that was one of her staff people that had talked to me about helping do her legislative work. Again, Joan was somewhat familiar with my legislative work from her position of working with Bill McCormick because, again, back to Bill again, many of the times I would have to go do the lobbying for the City of Topeka because he had other things he was doing. So she was somewhat familiar with that. I think that was one of the things that grabbed her.

When she decided that she needed me as a legislative liaison, it just kind of worked. We had that relationship already. It was easy to work with, and I really enjoyed that period of time, and probably enjoyed the off-season much more than the in-season. Off-season, I would get a state car, and I'd just travel the state two or three days at a time and go to different legislators, and we'd have dinner and visit, and go to their farm. Then just prior to the start of the season, if you recall, Joan had a houseboat down on Perry, and we would have the legislators in and meet and greet. That was a livable, lovable life.

ML: As enjoyable as it was, you moved away from that, and were appointed to the KCC.

JA: Part of the KCC thing came by my coming down and doing the senatorial work. Also during that time, I was serving back on the City Council. The lady that had won my district area, she had resigned and had gone back to school. When they replaced her, I was appointed to finish out her term. I was seriously thinking maybe I might run again and that kind of thing. Then when Joan talked to me about the legislative thing and I told her about that, and we got to talking about state government.

Honestly, I had never really wanted a state legislative job. There's just too many people. I can handle ten, but I can't handle many more than that. There was a bunch of them. Anyway, to make a long story short, she was asking me, she said, "Have you ever thought about any state position?" I said, "Well, not really." She mentioned Secretary this and this and that and this and that. I told her, well, you know, I really wasn't interested.

At one point in time, and this might have been when I was still with the League, there was a vacancy on the Commission, and someone submitted my name. To the best of my knowledge, I don't know who it was, but that was the only time that my name had ever surfaced on the KCC list. I said to her then, "I probably would have been interested in something like that," and she told me, "Well, you come take care of the legislative work, and I've got two positions, and one of them's yours."

ML: You had the experience of managing a utility. It was a water utility, but nonetheless. You learned a lot about rates and issues that fit together.

JA: All of it was very similar, very similar. Of all the jobs that I've had, I would say that the Corporation Commission probably was the most work, was the hardest to do, but also was so enjoyable. I enjoyed that so much.

ML: What major issues or challenges do you recall that you had to deal with when you were at the KCC?

JA: Mike, I would imagine that probably the biggest one, which probably caused me more pain was the Westar activities. The staff at KCC had you so prepared that the work was gone. You just had to put the bits and pieces together. I can recall that the Westar hearings with David Wittig, I was just flat amazed at the brilliance of this young man who decided to go his direction with his activities.

The more challenging ones would be when we would be doing some oil and gas things. I'd be out there on one of those oil derricks, and one of the workers decided it was time to scare people. They'd turn something loose and just bang the life out of you. I think I was blessed during my period of time on the Corporation Commission because Rachel Lipman was there at that same time, a very talented lady. We became close, very close. Any problems that I had, questions, I was able to go to her and get a good feel about them.

All of the work at the Corporation Commission was so valuable in making not just our state, but our area better, whether it was water, whether it was oil and gas, whether it was electricity. Of course, we didn't do nothing with cable TV, but that's another story. Transportation, it just touched on everything. We had awfully good staff people there that did their piece and handed you what you needed to do to go to those hearings.

ML: You intended to retire from state service in 1996, at the end of your term at the KCC, but then you were called back to service and appointed as State Fire Marshall in 2004 by Governor Sebelius. That's four governors for whom you worked. How did that State Fire Marshall come about?

JA: I'm about to run out of chapstick. Again, I was shocked when I got that call. In fact, I didn't even think she was searching for me. At that same time, my son was in the Topeka Fire Department. He was Chief of Arson Investigations. I just blanked out. I just thought, "No, she got me, and she wants him." After checking into it, what she needed more than a fire marshal was an administrator for an office. That was some fun times again. I had the privilege of doing that. It was probably something I never would have chosen to do, but it was a fun activity after getting involved in it. Again, a great staff, and there was a lot of good stories underneath all of that.

The problem was that the fire marshal at the time could not handle the business that was being taken care of. That's what she needed. That was when I was there for her, and I enjoyed it. Again, when we talk about all of them firsts, that's the first there.

ML: Yes, it is.

JA: What it brings to mind, I recall where it was, but down in southeast Kansas, they've got what they the Fire Chiefs Association. After I was appointed, they invited me down to one of their meetings. I had a young lady that was my attorney from the AG's office, and she went with me so she could protect them, not me, protect all of us. Anyway, we get there, and we do the little pleasantries, and finally whoever was head of their operations gets up and he says, "Jack, the reason we brought you down here was we wanted you to know that you are not our choice for Fire Chief."

You can only put salt in an old man's wounds for so long before it gets to burn. Before I could think about it, I stood up and said, "Chief, I may have to agree with you, but I'm the Governor's choice." My attorney said, "And as far as we're concerned, Jack, this meeting is over. Let's leave."

ML: That would have been in 2004. It's just remarkable and troubling that those kind of attitudes persist.

JA: It was. I had good experience being a Fire Marshall. I think it helped that I did not come out of the fire business because it give a whole different perspective. I was able to do something with staff that probably a person coming out of the fire business wouldn't have been able to do. I was able to handle it from an administrative side rather than looking at it from a fire prevention side. We had some traumatic problems there. That was part of why she needed to get rid of the other gentleman because he was permitting it to fester.

This is backing up a little bit, back to the Corporation Commission a minute. I remember when I went through a confirmation hearing. I still can't remember this guy's name. Anyway, I never will forget while I was at Health and Environment, I beat up on him pretty damn good, his operation, his union operation. Anyway, when it comes to my confirmation hearing, he got even.

ML: Returned the favor.

JA: Yes, and he deserved to. That's it. Gus Bogina. I see him around town every now and again, and we have the greatest laugh about that. He deserved his time on me because I'd had mine on him.

I also remember at that confirmation meeting, somebody, I don't know who it was, but he asked, "Do you know how much this job pays?" I said, "Not really." That was immaterial at that time. He said, "Well, we could probably get you for 25, 30,000 dollars, couldn't we?" I said, "Well, I don't know. I guess you could." I said, "The only thing is, if you pay me any less than the other two people, I'm going to sue you." And we moved on from there.

ML: You retired from the Fire Marshall's position in 2007. That was your permanent retirement from state government. We've gone through a whole list of things that you've done, experiences that you've had. Who are some of the notable or famous or more interesting folks that you've met in the course of that?

JA: All right. Do you want me to read this list? I certainly would say Alf Landon would be one of those, but there's any number of people on there that are very famous. Governor Sebelius introduced me to a gentleman by the name of Barack Obama. I did a prayer for a gentleman by the name of Pendergast, for a gentleman who ended up being president by the name of Jimmy Carter.

I met just tons of people who later come into prominence while leading municipalities, all the mayors, and Jack Reardon. I'm trying to think of the—I have met President Truman, the Bob Doles, and of course the same people I guess that everybody runs into, and I've been fortunate enough to run into a lot of the African Americans who have later become very prominent, the Jesse Jacksons, the John Lewises, the Andrew Youngs. I can't remember the guy that was mayor of Atlanta, Maynard Jackson.

So there's tons of them. But then while I was City Commissioner, my office was on the first floor, and right outside of my offices was the employee parking lot. In the back of this parking lot was sort of a loading area where you went into the municipal auditorium. Again, back to the time when entertainers traveled by bus, every now and then, they'd park a bus in there, and I've got to meet Elvis Presley there. Bill McCormick was a great, great Western music fan, and he and I went aboard Willie Nelson's little bus.

ML: We won't ask questions about what you did there.

JA: We smelled the smoke. And Rosalind Carter, I met her back there. Anyway, that's where the people kind of went. At that time, the auditorium was a big venue for getting in and out. That's where a lot of the famous people where.

ML: Just one final question, Jack, and that would be about your observations about Topeka today, its future.

JA: You know, Mike, it's interesting. I think back first, let me think back to our campaign. Somewhere back in some of that, one of the things we used to say all of the time was Topeka is a great place to live and a great place to work. I keep seeing that reappear. I think Topeka is growing, but I'm scared. For instance, my former employer, Goodyear, started in 1945. This last labor contract that the union got was a five-year contract. That scares me, and the reason it scares me is it gives companies too long to plan to eliminate jobs.

When I look at this plant out here, at one time, that was the #2 plant in the Goodyear organization. The #1 plant was in Los Angeles, California. It's been gone. Most of what they do out here has been gone. You can shoot a shotgun out there now. You won't even hit anybody. Those were good jobs, good paying jobs, and we need to be able to save things like that plant.

I think we've got a decent educational system, if we can get people to put some money into it so that every kid gets an opportunity. We need to keep some of these kids at home. This thing that Washburn has just done over here at the old military armory, it's so good, training kids for things that are available.

I still feel good about Topeka. I still feel good about Topeka. I think there is still a lot of possibilities. I don't think that personally—now this is just for me personally. I don't like the form of government. I never did, and that's the reason I quit in 1985. I just felt that at least under the Commission, you could hold a Commissioner accountable for what he did or didn't do. What we've got now is—that's just my way of looking at it.

I think in the long run, things are looking up. I think things are looking up. We can talk about the Black Lives Matter situation. I think that's something that needs to happen. Again, I don't see much difference in that than I saw when I was a Rambler. We eliminated that piece, and Fred

Slaughter become center for Topeka High School and later center for UCLA and Wooden's first championship.

There's a lot of things that can change for the better, but I think as long as we continue to work at it. We certainly need to hear each other. We need to listen to each other. The politics are unfortunately so divided in our area that it starts to tilt things. But, to me, those are things that we can overcome. It will get to a point where we can take the best of the best and make it work.

I think the possibilities for Topeka are great. I think we'll continue to—we've lost all of our psychiatric activities. Our VA system doesn't seem to be working as well as it could, but in the long run, it's still a great place to live.

ML: Earlier you had said you view Topeka as a good place. I just want to assure you that Topeka views you and Kansas views you as a real treasure, Jack.

JA: I've been blessed, Mike. I've been blessed. I've lived a charmed life. One last story I would like to tell you before we quit. I'm going back to Guam for just a minute. This is a two-sided story. I'm going to tell it to you first as I tell it today, and then I'll tell you the original story. I told you I played against the Yankees in '55. I batted against Bob Turley.

ML: Did you get a hit?

JA: I took him out of the park. I took him right out of the park. Now the true story is I batted against Bob Turley, and he hit my bat.

ML: That's good. Jack, thank you so much.

JA: My pleasure. My pleasure.

ML: It was a pleasure for me to be able to participate with you in this nice interview.

JA: You're like a son to this family, always have been.

ML: I don't know if you remember, but in law school, I think we had four seats there, my folks and you and Tillie were the ones that attended. It goes both directions.

JA: I can still see you coming out that little side door by the boulevard.

ML: Saying, "Thank heaven."

JA: It's been a great life. It's been a great life. I wouldn't trade it for anything.