

INTERVIEW OF EUGENE ANDERSON BY FRANCES JACKSON APRIL 21, 2022
KANSAS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Frances Jackson: Today is April the 21st, 2022. My name is Frances Jackson, and I'm associated with the African American Council of Elders in Wichita, Kansas. And with me is a former Representative David Heinemann who is our videographer. Today's interview is part of the Kansas Oral History Project¹ collection examining the diversity of voices active in public policymaking in the first quarter of the 20th and the 21st centuries. In these interviews, we learn about policy development through the eyes of those who were directly involved.

Today I have the honor to interview Eugene Anderson. Tell us what you did and what was your first position when you went to Topeka.

Eugene Anderson: I got my committee assignments, which I believe were Education, Public Health and Welfare, and State and Federal Affairs, and Elections.

FJ: So which of those committees really fit your concerns when you went to the state legislature? Which one really helped you do the work you thought you were sent to do?

EA: The Education Committee was always a challenge. The Federal and State Affairs Committee dealt with hot button issues.

FJ: What are hot button issues?

EA: Liquor by the drink, pari-mutuel wagering, betting, dog racing, things like that, those issues that get people up in arms.

FJ: Challenges what they think are their ethics.

EA: Right.

FJ: Their morals. So after you were there for a while or in the beginning, you were elected to those committees, let's just talk a little bit about how each of those committees made a difference to the constituency that sent you there.

EA: Education is very important to Wichita and Sedgwick County as well as the state. And funding education has always been kind of a long, drawn-out process because so many parts have to come together. I think being in a position to kind of understand what went into putting that money into education across the state just kind of broadens your perspective, and it makes you appreciate more what people in the education who are responsible for preparing our children, what they go through. So it was a good experience.

¹ The **Kansas Oral History Project** is a not-for-profit corporation created to collect oral histories of Kansans who were involved in shaping and implementing public policy. Recordings and transcripts of these oral history interviews are available to researchers, educators, and other members of the public through the Kansas State Historical Society and the State Library of Kansas and on our website, <https://ksoralhistory.org>. Funding for the project is provided by volunteers, individual donors, and Humanities Kansas, a nonprofit cultural organization connecting communities with history, traditions, and ideas to strengthen civic life. For more information about Humanities Kansas, see their website: <https://kansashumanities.org>

FJ: So education was your—really the aim was to make that so that all children had the opportunity to have the education they needed.

EA: Yes.

FJ: So as a result of that, which one of your efforts was the most outstanding for you and the one that created the most positive energy around what you thought you were there for?

EA: I think a couple of the scholarship programs that I was a part of, working through the process of getting those things through the legislature. These were not my ideas. These ideas came from the people, but legislators are in the position to make things happen, take the ideas from people, and have a platform to put those ideas into action. That's what we do.

FJ: As you were doing that, did it ever occur to you the age range of the people that were in the state legislature and in those political places, were they all over fifty-five or sixty-five and retired? What was that group like that you were there in Topeka with?

EA: A lot of the legislators were older. As a matter of fact, the year that I was elected, I think there were about twenty-seven or twenty-eight of the members of the legislature that were elected that year were under thirty years of age.

FJ: Oh, my goodness. That's astonishing in itself.

EA: That had never happened before. Believe me, it kind of took a few people by surprise. We were kind of a rebellious group. We're new at this.

FJ: Is that called, "the Times were changing?"

EA: And we're going to make things happen real fast.

FJ: Yes.

EA: And everybody was going to see things our way. But it didn't work like that. You had to build some friendships and trust. That's a big part of it.

FJ: It's a big part.

EA: But some of the old legislators, they were kind of mentors to a lot of us. One, in particular, was the late Representative Clarence Love from Kansas City. He told me the first day he met me, he said, "Whatever you do, when a person from your district takes the time to write you a letter, answer the letter. It might be a critical letter but answer the letter. And when they take the time to visit you in Topeka at your office, take care of their problem as best you can." He said, "I don't send my constituents over to a department. I take them if they have a problem with that department because I have"—these were his words—"I have a little more clout with getting the secretary to talk to me than they do. I take them over to see a deputy secretary, a secretary, whoever, to try to get their "issue resolved."

FJ: What would you say to a young person that is thinking about some of the issues that are particularly affecting them and their ability to make a difference? Would you say, “Run for office?” And if you do, how would you guide them to do that?

EA: I would say, “Get involved.” Understand the process, what it takes to make change occur—and I take an idea from this particular group or this particular individual and make something happen on a larger scale. When I first got involved in politics, I had worked in political campaigns. I put up yard signs for people, went to campaign events. I got to know people, and my thought then was I was not thinking about public office or becoming a candidate myself.

One day, a friend and I were talking. He said, “You know, you’re always involved in stuff. Why don’t you become a candidate?” And I said, “Oh, man, you know.” And then, believe it or not, I thought about it, and he kept on me, and I did.

FJ: Good.

EA: It was an interesting experience. I filed by petition. I did not pay a filing fee, and I went door to door, and that was very interesting, believe me. But it was a good experience. You get to know people. You get to hear what they’re thinking. You get to talk to them.

FJ: So that sort of activity around “How do I become a real part of this community and listen to some of the ideas and complaints?” started way before you got to Wichita.

EA: Yes.

FJ: Tell us a little bit about how your life was before you came to Wichita that gave you the energy that stirred you up to make this community part of the way you wanted to live your life.

EA: I think there were several things. When I went to school, I grew up in Georgia. Of course, schools back there were not integrated. We had to learn, we had to know really in our classes, especially in what was called civics class.

FJ: Yes.

EA: They call it government today, it was called civics then. We had to know all the secretaries of the governor’s cabinet, what they did, all the departments. We had to know the members of the County Commission, the City Commission by name, and by district.

FJ: How interesting.

EA: That fascinated me. I didn’t realize then that was a seed planted to get me a little more interested. And another thing, it was a policy of the high school which I graduated that becoming a registered voter before graduation was part of your final grade.

FJ: What was that high school?

EA: Douglass High School in Thomasville, Georgia, named after Frederick Douglass. Our teachers had a policy. If you were going to be eighteen years of age by the time of the next election, you were required in order to get your final grade to go down and register to vote.

FJ: That was going to be my last question. Go ahead.

EA: That's when they still had the literacy test.

FJ: Literacy and what else?

EA: The poll tax, that was not on my generation. That was more like my parents and my grandparents. They had to pay poll taxes and pass a literacy test.

FJ: Right.

EA: But I became a registered voter as a senior in high school about four months before I graduated. Georgia was the first state to have eighteen-year-old voting. We took advantage of that. It was an interesting experience going down to the courthouse and having all these people look at you, a whole busload of us going in to register.

FJ: Wasn't it sort of a new sense of being—I want to say “powerful,” but it wasn't necessarily powerful. It was more like you have vision of what can be more or better or could help your life be one that you really wanted to live—that whole idea of there's more to life than just—what did you raise? Corn? Cotton?

EA: Tobacco and peanuts.

FJ: Yes. And then having a whole group of people sit there and decide whether or not you were capable even after you followed the rules. How did that feel?

EA: You had to be at your best.

FJ: You did.

EA: I realized that I had a lot of coaching, a lot of encouragement from my teachers, from people in the neighborhood who just kind of coached me, sometimes even dared me to do things. But it was all a part of that village mentality that it takes a village to raise a child, and I was part of that village. Everybody knew everybody. If I acted up at school, my mother knew immediately because she worked at the school.

FJ: Yes.

EA: And I couldn't do anything because my mother worked there. So everybody would want to tell my mom, “That boy of yours is acting up.”

FJ: You said, “Please keep my name out of it!”

EA: Yes. And I think being encouraged by other people helped motivate me.

FJ: I do, too.

EA: You don't quit. You might take a break and rest, but you don't quit.

FJ: I'm thinking that more and more. I used to think, "I'm retiring from this," but now that I look at it, it's a lifelong process.

EA: It is.

FJ: This whole thing of "How do I make this community better? How do I get people to see that I'm concerned? In what ways can I be helpful?" And you have found so many ways to do that. You have already inspired other people to do it, too, which is part of that whole thing of "How does this community operate?" and "How do they make people feel included?" It seems like that was so natural for you.

Tell me about a moment when you were really struggling with "How do I get these people to understand how important this is to my community?"

EA: That's where building the trusting relationships, that's a big part of it. People who live on the other end of the state, they're not really familiar with the kind of issues they have in an urban area. So you have to build those relationships, just as I am not familiar with all of the things that they have in rural areas.

So you have people that you have confidence in, people that you trust to help guide you through those things because legislators are not the smartest people in the world.

FJ: Oh, I heard it! And what else?

EA: But we're in a position to make things happen.

FJ: Yes.

EA: We take those ideas we get from other people, and we make things happen with their ideas.

FJ: You weave it together.

EA: Yes. You listen to those things, and you say, "Maybe some of this is good. All of it's not good, but there's another idea coming from another source. Maybe we can marry these things together and come up with a plan."

FJ: And it's all about that communication, isn't it?

EA: Yes.

FJ: I've noticed that when people close down and aren't willing to receive something different than what they think, that you come out with less than because that doesn't broaden the base for being inclusive.

So as a person who really tried hard to look at education, what are you most proud of about those moments when you were struggling to get education for everyone that was a high standard?

EA: I would think that trying to equalize the funding and meet the needs in several diverse communities, you know, you have very small school districts. You have very large school districts. As a matter of fact, I think USD 259 is the largest school district in the state if I'm not mistaken.

FJ: I think you're right.

EA: And trying to balance those things, keeping in mind that this is the next generation of Kansans, not a western Kansas, an urban Kansas, but all of Kansas that we have to try and provide a proper environment, the resources that keep them moving forward and becoming leaders themselves.

FJ: That's a stunning statement for somebody who comes from Georgia, where those things were taught in a very negative way. And that is, people weren't accepted or included or even allowed to vote until about your time that you voted. So to carry that positive thing to Kansas, to make Kansas your home, and to create some energy around "How can we even make Kansas better?"

So I see you as a person that was ahead of your time. Did you feel that way?

EA: No, but I know I was outspoken as hell.

FJ: That gets us there.

EA: And that gets attention.

FJ: That gets attention, yes.

EA: No, I've always thought that if you want to make a difference, go where differences are being made. I've never been one to criticize people because they didn't do something. Maybe I didn't ask them to do anything.

FJ: It could be.

EA: I've always tried to be a positive person, even on my worst day, and I've had a few days of those bad days, especially in the military because that's a whole different lifestyle.

FJ: It is.

EA: But I think it helped me grow. There's discipline. There's responsibility, and you become an adult in the military. I went in right out of high school. I mean, there was discipline in the home, but this is a different kind of discipline because you have to be responsible for yourself. There are rules and regulations that you have to know and that you have to abide by, and if you don't, there's punishment.

FJ: There's punishment, yes. That takes me to an interest that I have about how it is that people can diversify what's interesting to them and what they can concentrate on in their lifetime. I know one of the things that became very interesting to you was a man by the name of Mr. Monk

EA: Yes.

FJ: Why was he interesting to you? What were the circumstances that led you to then compose a book about his life²?

EA: He had a very interesting life. He was one of those individuals who went through a lot of things that would dishearten most people, but he was not a bitter person. He had this saying that he followed his whole life. He was in some situations where he was treated very unfairly. He almost lost his life a couple of times. He had this mantra that "Talent has no color. Use your talent. Forget about your color. Just use your talent. Somebody will notice that." That was his attitude.

He was from a big family in a small town in Louisiana. I traveled with him several times when I was putting this book together and making sure it was as accurate as possible that reflected his life as accurately as I could. He took me all over the little town. He could recall things at nine, eight years old as if it happened yesterday. I kept making notes. I told him, "You know, some of this stuff might appear in a book about your life someday." He just started laughing. "Yeah, sure, okay."

But the book was being worked on prior to his death, and once he died, I really kind of committed myself, "I've got to get this done." I would have enjoyed him having the opportunity to read it, but after 102 years, 7 months, 3 days, and a few hours, he went on home at 102 years old. I got his last interview that I have that I use sometimes when I'm talking about this book. He was interviewed on local television, Channel 3, "A Salute to Veterans." He was one of the early ones, a very strong individual, very committed, very quiet in the community, but he believed and supported young people, and he and his wife, they had a motorhome. When I would invite a group of pages up to Topeka, they would put him in a motorhome and bring him up there.

FJ: Really?

EA: Yes. No charge. They wanted those young people to experience that. I think part of the reward now for me is I've had some of those young people as they've gone on out in the world say, "Hey, Mr. Anderson, I remember coming up to page for you. That opened my eyes.

²A Warrior, A Patriot, A Hero, and a Mentor: The Life and Times of John W. Monk 1916-2018 by Eugene Anderson, Dorrance Publishing Company, Pittsburgh, PA.

FJ: It did.

EA: "I didn't know those things went on. And to see somebody in my neighborhood a part of this, it kind of opened my eyes a little bit." That makes you feel pretty good.

FJ: It does.

EA: You think you've reached somebody, and they're doing some things in their lives to maybe reach out and help other people.

FJ: How one manages the energy of life in a community and how we put it to work and the way that we gather information around those ideas, to me it seems that as many experiences as you can have in a community really allows you to know that community. You've had some other jobs in this community. What were they?

EA: My lord. Other than political?

FJ: Yes.

EA: Actually I ran my own business off and on.

FJ: Tell us about that.

EA: The first business was a nonprofit business. It didn't start out that way. It just ended that way. And we had to close it. But we didn't stop. There was something else that we were looking at.

I think when you create a business, you certainly want it to be successful. I relied on Mr. Monk and his family, his wife because they were successful business people. When I was putting the first project together, I was trying to figure out the financing and went over to talk to he and his wife. He said, "Well, there are a couple of options here." He explained those options to me. "You're trying to get too much money from this source when you can maybe do it this way with other sources and bring some other people into this project rather than trying to do it by yourself."

I listened to him. Of course, now we have a business in the building that he purchased when he was alive, he and his family. That's where my office is now. And I remodeled that building for them, not knowing that my wife and I were going to have a business there when we did it.

He was very proud of that building because he bought it, and he had some struggles with it, he and his family. But he bought it; he paid for it in his lifetime. He told me, he said, "I'm going to leave this to my family, and I hope they'll do something with it," and they are.

FJ: That's incredible. You didn't mention barbecue.

EA: I'm good at that. There are a lot of people in the legislature who will attest to that.

FJ: And not only that, there's something about this life-giving sustenance that it improves the political environment, I have noticed when you're around.

EA: I used to do a lot of preparation for events when I was in the Senate. I'd take my motorhome and my mobile kitchen and go up there. Then we would get off from work, and we'd go have a meal and be with each other. There wasn't all of that animosity.

FJ: Food does that, doesn't it?

EA: People actually got along.

FJ: Yes.

EA: I remember, and I'm going to tell this because it's my favorite story. The late Senator Jim Allen, he had a habit when I would go up and prepare food for whatever function. He'd come in the kitchen. "What you cooking there, man?" I said, "I've got ribs, beef, chicken, whatever."

He'd come in, and he'd go over to the pot and take the lid off of it, reach in there and get him a rib or whatever. "Oh, this is good." "Okay."

He smoked Pall Mall cigarettes.

FJ: Yes.

EA: Back then, I smoked cigarettes, too.

FJ: We won't tell.

EA: Yes., I would go up, and I would open his coat pocket, and I would take out his cigarettes. I'd take one out, and I would look at him and say, "You got a light?" He said, "Eugene, if you were not so big, I would knock the hell out of you for reaching in my pocket and getting my cigarettes." I said, "Jim, if you do that, you'd better not eat anything else I cook."

It was those kinds of things that kind of lightened the mood. You could do that with people. You had those friendships, and that was very rewarding.

FJ: I want to talk a little bit about those friendships. As you developed within the community of people that you were working with, how do you think that you could pass on to another generation of people interested in politics specifically, how they might operate in terms of getting people together around them and to improve their chances of being elected to office?

EA: I think as a candidate for any public office, being a good listener is an asset. I know we all like to express our point of views, and some time we'd debate a little bit, but listening is the key. When you listen to people, you kind of get their ideas, and it kind of gives you an opportunity to put yourself in their place. I found that I could disagree with you and keep my mouth shut at the

same time and nod my head like, “Oh, yes. We’re good. I understand where you’re coming from.”

One of the best people I knew at that was Joan Finney. She could listen to criticism with a smile on her face.

FJ: Tell who Joan Finney is.

EA: She was a governor. As a matter of fact, she was the first female governor in the state of Kansas. I served in her administration. As a matter of fact, I resigned from the Senate to take a job as her Director [Division] of Aviation [Kansas Department of Transportation], which was a very challenging job, but very interesting.

FJ: She was one of those people that sort of widened her perspective, too, in terms of how she did select people to serve with her. After she had done that, did you feel that this was something that you really wanted to do, or were you in the political group that just did things when asked or whatever?

EA: You know, Joan and I were friends. We were friends for a long time—as a matter of fact, when she first became a candidate for State Treasurer, I introduced her to a group of people in Topeka. And we developed a friendship. We could be honest with each other. We trusted each other.

FJ: There you go.

EA: As a matter of fact, when she appointed me Director of Aviation, she came down here two days after that, and we had a function out at Cowtown, and I went up and I talked with her. I said, “You know, you’re going to take a lot of heat for this.” She said, “You took some heat for me, and I never forget who stands by me.”

FJ: That’s incredible.

EA: I said, “Okay.” She said, “I made my decision. I will live with it. I know you will do a good job for the people of Kansas. We all work for the people of Kansas, and I know you’ll do a good job for me.” I said, “Yes, ma’am.”

FJ: That is stunning. Many times when you’re just reading about an appointment or whatever in the paper, it’s like, “They probably gave them some money. They probably did something else.” It was a true relationship.

EA: Joan and I trusted each other. We could sit in her office when she was treasurer, and we were arguing about the investments in South Africa, trying to get those investments pulled to end that apartheid government in South Africa. They called it “apartheid” there. It’s “segregation” here, but it’s the same thing.

We would go over the figures and see where we were losing money, and she was very good at that. She was an economist. She understood that. She would walk me through all of those things and take me page by page. We built a good, strong relationship.

FJ: That's incredible.

EA: I trusted her, and she trusted me.

FJ: Do you think that the strategies that you learned to use while you were doing this work for Kansas can be repeated in a way that makes us even stronger? Do you think we've got to try a totally new way of doing politics in Kansas?

EA: I think that the way you change things within a system is to get involved in that system. You don't change anything from the outside. To me, that has always been my approach. I can sit here and complain all day long, but if I don't get out here and show that I really have an interest in this, I really want to move this issue, and I feel strongly about it, then nothing happens. People can talk among themselves all day long, but unless you are in a situation where the people you're talking with about this problem about or the situation about are in a position to do something about it, nothing gets done. —

FJ: So you have to keep looking for those opportunities, if you're working in the field.

EA: Yes.

FJ: And as you're looking, not everything that comes to you is positive. How do you deal with the negative effects of taking a position?

EA: You have to understand that when you do those things, if they're not popular, that you make enemies. You might also have some failures there along the way. I think a lot of people don't get involved in things because they're afraid to fail. That's not me. I'll try it, and if it doesn't work, I might try it again. If not, I might go to another plan, but it will get done, sooner or later. It might not be the whole loaf of bread, but it might be a slice or two.

FJ: I'll take all the slices, okay.

EA: That was an old saying in the legislature. People would say, "I didn't get the whole loaf, but I got three or four slices. I'm good with that."

FJ: "I'm working on it." And the other thing that I have often thought about in terms of any state and their legislature, most of them don't last all year. In our case, it's what? Three months? How do you manage just the home and family and all the travel and all the many ways that you have to make adjustments just to be effective?

EA: It's not easy. For that time that you're in the legislature, most legislators maintain two households, one back in your district and one in Topeka. It's kind of hard on your family because your family makes those same sacrifices. But then there are times that many of the things I

would go to, especially when I was traveling to events out of state, I would drive and take my children and wife with me so they could go and be part of these things.

As a matter of fact, our daughter, our oldest daughter, she would say, “Daddy, I used to watch you, the way you dealt with people. That impressed me.” She said, “I always wanted to be a teacher, but I also had an interest in politics because I was exposed to those things by being there with you, how you dealt with other people.” To have your child say that to you, it’s meaningful.

FJ: It’s beautiful because many times, children don’t even get an opportunity to have that sort of conversation. A lot of people, especially a lot of people that have regular hours, the 9 to 5, they don’t see their kids but when they’re sleepy getting up or sleepy going to bed. It doesn’t have the depth. So to be able to do that and to hear that comment from her has to be wonderful.

At this point, what is it that you would like to share that you think was most impressive to you as you did this work?

EA: That would be hard to take, but I think if I had to highlight anything, it would be when I served as Director of Aviation because I got to work with industry, the aviation industry. I got to work with other aviation commissioners and directors from across the country. And I got to get my pilot’s license. I learned to fly an airplane.

FJ: Do tell. You mean you can become a legislator and learn to fly an airplane?

EA: No. As the state Director of Aviation, they had a program. The state would pay part of it and give me time off to learn because it enhanced my job skills. That was very rewarding. I didn’t have to spend four or five hours driving someplace. I’d go rent an airplane and go take care of my business and be back in Topeka.

FJ: That’s a good representation for coming from Wichita, isn’t it? With all the airplane stuff we do.

EA: Yes. It was very interesting. I worked with a lot of other people across the state who had an interest in aviation. Back when we were fighting to try and get the product liability thing changed because of a situation that basically all the manufacturers had stopped making single-engine aircraft because if there was an accident, even though the plane could have been twenty-five years old but modified ten times, the manufacturer was still liable, and we saw a need [for legislation] to try and help the industry change that.

The way that we did that, we got a lot of other state directors together, and I pointed out to them all the money that our manufacturers in Kansas spent with their state. Once they saw that, they said, “Hmm.”

FJ: Money.

EA: Believe it or not because they could get their own members of Congress on board, and finally that became law. When President Clinton signed that legislation in 1994—

FJ: Were you there?

EA: No. It wasn't my job to be there. It was my job to make it happen with the people that I work with. But once enough states got behind it, then it happened. Congress passed it, and the president signed it.

FJ: It's been a remarkable time. I keep thinking about how people live their lives, and what it means to people you don't even know. When you were talking about children coming up to you and being in the state legislature, did you begin to feel like it was worth it for me and my family to have had this opportunity?

EA: Yes. As a matter of fact, when we had the restaurant, all the pages that I had pictures of when they would come up to Topeka and they would take pictures with the governor, I put those pages photos on the wall of the restaurant. Some of those parents would come in, "That's my kid up there."

FJ: Another way of sharing an experience.

EA: It was good. I was trying to get pages to come up to Topeka, and I would always encourage their parents to take a day off and spend that day with their child because "I think both of you will learn something."

FJ: And they did. They told you that.

EA: Yes. I didn't always pick the brightest students. There were a couple of little bad ones that didn't act right. I wanted them to come. I said, "Hey, I'm going to reach these children in some way." A couple of them came up and said, "Man, all that goes on up there. I didn't know all that went on" I said yes.

I think having an opportunity to expose young people to that kind of an environment, it might not ring a bell with them right then, but someplace down the line, they're going to think about that. "I might try this." And that's a good thing about it.

FJ: It's a good thing. As a final word to our community and this project, what do you see as a future for Kansas and the way that we have handled our legislative issues and community issues around education, around integration, around the whole thing of economics? What's something you can share with us?

EA: One of the weaknesses that I see, and this is from my perspective of living in the same community that elected me into public office quite some time ago, is that economic conditions in some communities are not as strong as they should be, and because every community needs a local economy in that community. One of the things when I grew up was the fact my parents operated a small neighborhood store in my community. Their philosophy was, you should not have to go outside of your community to buy everything that you need. There should be someplace within the community that's available for you to purchase basic household goods.

Those things are important to any community, financial institutions. And I've seen some positive things happen as you have with a couple of banks in the last fifteen years of coming to the community and making a difference. But those things have to continue, and you have to continue to engage people. But I think people have to understand that if you have no attachment or investment into the community, you're not going to be very interested in it. But once you have a community attachment and community investment, then things look a little different, and you get a little more motivated to make things happen.

A lot of people ask me, "Why haven't you moved from that neighborhood?" Moving doesn't change the neighborhood. My staying changes the neighborhood.

FJ: Thank you. A wonderful interview.

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