Mark Tallman: I'm Mark Tallman. I've worked with the Kansas Association of School Boards since 1990 in a variety of roles from working in the legislature as a lobbyist who researched in advocacy on educational issues. And I'm conducting this interview with Dr. Jerry Farley on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing former legislators and significant leaders in our state and state government, particularly those who served during the 1960s through 2010. The interviews will be accessible to researchers, educators, and the public through the KOHP website—kansasoralhistory.org—and also the Kansas Historical Society and the State Library. Transcriptions are made possible by generous donors. David Heinemann is the videographer today.

Today, as I said, we're talking with Dr. Jerry Farley living in Topeka, and we are having the ability to do this interview in the beautiful home that was the president's home. You're still living here in your current role. We want to talk about your experience as leading a very unique institution in some ways, Washburn University. We'll talk about why that's unique, and how that has allowed you to see education issues, government issues, community issues, over really at least a quarter century period here in our state capital city. So, I'm very excited to do that. Why don't we start, if you can give us a little bit of background on yourself, where you grew up, what that was like. We want to let people know a little bit about how you came from a very small town in Oklahoma to leading the university here in Topeka. So, tell us about yourself.

Jerry Farley: I'd be glad to. It would be boring to, but it's something that I think is important because there's some other people, kids that will feel more comfortable perhaps when they see something like this. When I would visit with some students on campus at Washburn, I knew that some of those people are going to have that piece of their background will perhaps help them forever. There were an awful lot of people that did that, I'm sure.

I was brought up in Oklahoma, Tipton, Oklahoma, I'm sure you've heard of that [place] before.

MT: Not until I read your bio.

JF: It was a small town. It was about a thousand people.

MT: When you were there, what was your schooling like, starting grade school and on? What were your experiences there?

JF: I liked school. I liked taking their ideas. I liked doing—they'd give assignments. I liked knowing what they're doing. It was good. It also gave us that chance to see what it would be like to be involved in a university. In fact, I didn't know what university was.

MT: That's something that kind of struck me. As we're talking to people in this series about education, I always kind of say, "When did you decide you wanted to become a teacher?" But that really wasn't your experience. You were interested in going to the university, but you didn't really have a plan at the time. Is that right?

JF: Absolutely correct. I did not have anything I was supposed to be doing, what I was doing, I would have to get [that knowledge] by doing it with classes. I had three major classes that I took. I took something in arithmetic, mathematics and English and all of the things that gets involved in that and took the understudy of what it was that was important. I didn't pay attention to it when I went to school, and it was probably the week before, I had to turn in my material at the University of Oklahoma. I didn't know who it was, what it was, what it was for, or how they did it.

So, that was fun to do. That was kind of interesting. But I went home that night without my parents knowing that I was actually doing something that might lead to something bigger—a job. A friend of mine took me under his wing and took me through all the kinds of things you had to do to go to a university. They had to, if you're going to do anything, you've got to go through all of those things.

MT: Getting to know your biography a little bit, you got interested sort of in the business side. Is that right?

JF: I did. I don't know why I did. It was because I could do that very well. It gave us a way to grow enough money that I could pay for a lot of the expenses. So, that turned out to be a really good connection. Without that connection, I didn't have the money to go to school.

MT: So that was a way both to help put yourself through school, but it also gave you connections at the university. And that was kind of—your entry was not that you necessarily wanted to be in education as a teacher, but you got involved on the business side and ultimately the leadership side down there starting at the University of Oklahoma, correct?

JF: Really the thing that I enjoyed about it was that I'd see those people, that they had jobs. When I was getting nearer the time to graduate, one of my teachers recommended me to some people that were looking for people. So, I said, "Okay, let's do that, see what it is." I didn't know what I was going to get into, but you had to have something.

So, when I went to school and got a degree finally, my parents I remember when they got finished after I finished, they wondered, "Is that going to help you find a job? Is it going to be inside or outside? Are you going to pull bulls again?" But it gave me an opportunity to go to a university, and I turned out to be an accountant. I don't know why I did. I just did. And it was polished so it looked like it was really nice.

MT: What is your thought on—so, a degree in accounting. You could have just been an accountant, right, and spent your career doing that. What got you interested in working for and with the university systems down there? You were involved with several institutions. What led you into wanting to be part of the management, the administration, the leadership of higher education?

JF: That's exactly what happened. I did. I was looking for something to do. The faculty member that recommended me for the administrative issues that I would run into, and I loved those. I went to it, and it was great. It was good. I had graduated from college. What do you do about

that? And I was what I was doing, what I wanted to do, and I was in good help. People were willing to give me an idea.

MT: You indicated you were drafted. What branch of the service were you in?

JF: The Army.

MT: After the Army, how did you get back reconnected with higher education?

JF: I went back to school.

MT: You went back to school, continuing your education.

JF: Yes, I got a master's degree, and I loved doing that, but I also got to go back to the courses and the programs that I could get into and use that to get my story right and go on into the next piece of my career. So, there were things that I had to do in order to do that. It turned out to be great. I loved it. And they gave me a job.

So, that's two times the University of Oklahoma has given me two jobs. Unbelievable. So it's really something special to me. So, I just kept going on that for another couple of years, and then I had a bigger problem, and that was I had cancer. It was pretty serious. But I got through it, and all of that that I had learned I used to make it a better place.

MT: Where were you and what were you doing prior to the time—what prepared you when you got interested in the presidency of Washburn?

JF: Well, that was really something different. I'd never thought about going to a presidency. I wanted to be a great, well understanding what's going on in higher education. So, I took a job in that, and I was involved in that for about a couple [of years], maybe, something like that. That gave me the jump from that into something called a comptroller, which was one that had to have a lot of understanding of the university, and I learned more about it day by day by day by day. And I was in probably in during nine times of what I should have been doing. I just worked very hard. I didn't have anything else to do. So, I did that.

So, I was happy to be there. There was a job come open. I knew I had to have a PhD, and there was a job in Stillwater that I applied for with Stillwater.

MT: At Oklahoma State.

JF: At Oklahoma State. You had to have that to progress to the next step of what would that be. I was pretty happy getting a different job, but it was still just an administrative job. I went to going to the university at Stillwater.

MT: So, you worked on your PhD while you were at Oklahoma State? Is that right?

JF: No. I finished my job with the PhD. That gave me what I needed to do to have a piece of what was necessary to do, and that worked to be in Stillwater. I loved it in Stillwater, at OSU, and it was fun to do. While I was there, I got a job back at OU, and while I was there, I just hired a person to be our person to get information about other people's jobs.

So, what I'd do, I'd check it to see what it was. And a fellow that I had worked with and that I had learned from him and he ran [the program] for me. His name was Tom Ellis. He was from here [Topeka]. I had to hire somebody in the early days for things to do for freshmen. It was pretty exciting, and he came in one day and said, "I've got a job for you. You need to see what you think about it," and it was a vacant position at Washburn University.

MT: That was your connection.

JF: That was the final connection.

MT: Bringing you here to Topeka.

JF: Yes.

MT: What did you know about Washburn University when you started looking at it as an opportunity?

JF: Nothing.

MT: Nothing? What can you tell us about Washburn University at the time you were looking at it? It was a rather unique institution.

JF: It was a really incredible university. I'd been at big schools, OU, OSU, [inaudible] health schools in Oklahoma City. all of that. When I got here at the university in Washburn, there was really something happening, something happening on campus. People were doing things, but they didn't do it very well. They thought they could do that, and they could. They could do a good job. So I told them, "I'd like to take that. I'd like to do an interview." And actually that's only the second interview I've ever had. At others, I'd been receiving, just a galaxy of things to do.

And it was unique. It was doing something that was really something special, it looked like. And it looked like, I didn't really look that hard at what was being said around the campus. I wanted to do it. I wanted to do something that was good and was easy to do, I thought, and it was amazing, here at Washburn. It was incredible.

And Tom Ellis had worked there. So, he gave me more information about it. I didn't think there would be anything that would come of it. And it did. They came and I came. We interviewed one another. It was a great job.

MT: Something that probably many of our viewers and readers know but maybe not everyone, Washburn, of course, here in Topeka, Kansas, the capital, had the distinction, at least as I

understand it, and I've been observing Washburn for a long time, was the only remaining municipal university in the country. Am I saying that right? In that it was not independent, it was not operated by the state. It was not a community college. It was a full institution, but with a heavy reliance on local funding and local governance, and that made it certainly unique in Kansas, if not the country. Am I remembering that correctly?

JF: Good memory.

MT: Again, it was kind of unique. So that's what I thought. You were kind of walking into something that—

JF: I looked at it. "What is this? And what do the people say about it?" To me, it seemed to me [Washburn] was looking for somebody to do something unique. I didn't know anybody. I didn't know anybody on the board. I didn't know any of the faculty members that were there. There weren't any potential connections to anybody. I looked at all of them, talked to them, talked with them about what they saw there, and it seemed to me that they were ready to go and do something. There was just something different about it, and that was great. That was unbelievable. I didn't try to nag anybody that needed to have a job. They would just whatever is there. It was incredible.

So, I started working on things. They wanted to know what I was thinking about doing. What did I have in mind? I thought about it a while, and after about halfway through the first year, by then, it was not bad, not bad at all. By the time I did a review of what it was to do and these jobs were just important, and I wanted to try it out. I wanted to see if it would work. So, we all got together in the administrative top of the institution. They all wanted to do it, and it went just great, just great.

MT: Again, I lived in Topeka during a large part of that time. I had some insight into some of what you were looking at. In my mind, there were a couple of big things. I don't know what order to take them in. Maybe we could start by the fact that when I came to Topeka, very much the sense of Washburn was that this was kind of a commuter campus. It had an older population. As I understand, reading some of your background, when you started looking from a strategic sense of what you needed to do, you kind of had the idea and I gather support to say, "We need to refocus that a little bit." What were the changes that you made, I guess starting with looking at the kind of students you served and how you did that?

JF: If you talk of people that were involved in it at the beginning, that first year, they were ready to go. They were ready to do something. Why haven't we done anything up to now? But I was waiting for people to tell me what they needed to do, what I need to know, and they were glad to tell me. We didn't have any fight between one another in some way. We just didn't do it.

So, it was something that was really a collection of great ideas. All of those things that were great ideas, we were able to put them together. And by putting them together, we could do something really special.

But there were a whole lot of bad things. When I stepped back a couple of years later and looked at what we were doing, it was amazing because there were people doing stuff that they weren't ready yet to do that, but they were ready to go anyhow. So, that was a really unique situation. Really, that was something fun.

But everything that was going on in the big schools, we didn't have anything like it. You mentioned some of the things a few moments ago. Students. We didn't have a lot of students [living] on campus. We just didn't have any. We didn't have any housing.

MT: I Think some of those were really around, and facilities were a big part of it because, as I recall, you really needed to improve the amenities of life on the campus. You wanted to make opportunities so students could have a more traditional college experience. That was, as I understand, part of the goal. How do you then bring a wider group of students, younger students and foster more a sense of community? So, part of that was just creating the facilities that would allow that to happen. Is that right?

JF: We had very few things that we had on campus that we could then look at and boast about that we could do.

But we had some not-so-great housing on campus. They had some apartments on the corner of the university, and they were terrible. I hope that nobody went there and thought it was the greatest thing because it wasn't.

And the other thing was that we had Regents that were willing to take a risk. One of them was Joan Wagnon. We built a dormitory, and everybody took a risk on that, and they would tell me, "Why don't you spend maybe five million dollars on something? We'll see how it looks." And we just did it over time, over time, over. And Joan, she was one who knew how to do these kinds of things, and she was ready to do it. So, we did that.

We did a cafeteria, and we needed athletics. Athletics were not good. The students wanted to do things, all kinds of things, you keep what you can do, and you keep doing it. So, we turned around. We had to get a new football coach, and he turned out to be great. He didn't stay long with us, but he turned out to be great. Everything went perfect. We just didn't have anything that went wrong in that first year or so, two or three years. It made a big effort.

MT: Your sense was that the Topeka community got behind it and embraced those changes.

JF: They did. They let us put names on their windows before the game would be here. There was all kinds of other things that was going on. It wasn't just parties, although we did have some people that were pretty good at partying.

MT: An important part of the college experience.

JF: We tried not to do too much of it, but we do that. So you do that. You do other kinds of other things. We got people that were working on being the best person that would come from the school and show them what we could do.

MT: So, a lot of those things it sounds like were things that you could do within the institution, but another big transition had to go beyond that. Again, I'll give you my memory of what t was like, and you can expand a little bit. Part of the honor and privilege of being a municipal university was that the people I guess of Topeka, you'll have to tell me the tax base, were supporting the institution with a pretty high property tax.

One thing we know in Kansas, probably true everywhere, property taxes are very sensitive. There had been a debate that I remember as a much younger man, "Should Washburn become a state university?" And the state universities weren't sure that was a great idea because there were always concerns over how big the pie is.

JF: How many slices are you going to put in?

MT: How do you slice the same-sized pie? So, you worked with and the institution came forward with a way to kind of change your funding around. You couldn't do that on your own. There had to be involvement of the state. Can you talk a little bit about what that was like or what that entailed, and how do you think you were able to sell that? You're still a municipal university here at Washburn, but it's kind of got into a little more hybrid role now. What happened in that sense?

JF: It was complicated. You're absolutely correct. It was complicated. We would simply talk with the legislature, people at the legislature, the mayor, talk and see what they say. In fact, I keep using the word, Joan Wagnon. She was one morning on one of the radio stations, and somebody was calling in to see whether or not we would be interested in having something used--At any rate, what we had to do was to get more people to agree that it would be better to be a sales tax than it was to be a property tax.

MT: Right.

JF: That was a big deal. No one really knew what would happen. I thought I knew what it was. Just listen to it, I'd done it before. I just want to do it. So, we did, and we wrote a bill. We ran it through the House. In less than a month, a couple of weeks passed by, it passed the Senate. Governor Graves said, "Great idea." Of course, the people of Topeka, first, they couldn't wait to do it, and we decided to do it.

We put it together in a little over a month, and we fixed it so that it would come before everybody that needed to be done within about a month. It passed. I promised them [the public] that we wouldn't have any more money out of the sales tax than we did out of property. So, it worked.

MT: That was helpful to the community in the sense that you moved from a type of tax, the property tax, which most people don't like very much, to a sales tax. I guess maybe because you pay it regularly, maybe because a lot of people who don't live in Topeka come into Topeka and shop. So you have that as a little bit of an advantage, too. But it was seen as a win to the community. So, you were both able to kind of transform sort of how the institution was

operating, its image, the kids it was serving, and found out a way to sell a more popular way to fund it, and got that through the legislature.

JF: It was great. People were willing to put the money into it. We did one thing that I'd never seen it done before, and that is that if you over-collected, you put it into a way to pay for it later.

MT: Kind of a reserve. I think that was one of the things I read in your background a little bit. One of the reasons why governmental entities tend to like the property tax is it's pretty stable. You can collect it. Sales tax, not so much. It goes up and down a little bit. As I understand, you came up with a system that said, "Okay, if we bring in—if some years, we're high, let's put that in reserve so if there's years where we're lower, we can dip into that." I gather that's worked out well over the time. I don't recall you having a financial crisis worse than anyone else over the last twenty years or so.

JF: We had what I called the smoothing fund. If we collected more than we had budgeted, we put it away. If we had less than was budgeted, it was there to spend. That worked out to be a phenomenal program. That gave us that way a feeling that this was all going to work, and it has.

MT: Another somewhat unique thing about Washburn is you had your own Board of Regents. You mentioned Joan Wagnon who probably viewers of the Oral History Project will know from wearing many, many hats from state legislator to Secretary of Revenue but also mayor of the fine city of Topeka, therefore on the Board of Regents. So, you had a local board, but you also had some work with the State Board of Regents, as I understand it. You were kind of in the position of serving both a local group but having to be coordinated with the rest of the system. So, you're kind of almost working with two Board of Regents. I don't know whether that—do you need more pay to do that as president?

JF: I didn't think about that.

MT: Or is that just considered a benefit? Talk a little bit about how you and Washburn fit in to the larger, the overall state system of both the universities and community colleges and other institutions.

JF: Starting when I first came, many people didn't think this was going to work. They think anything that the state gave the state institutions money, the pie's been cut again. We were just working, trying to come up with good ideas and seeing if it would work. It seemed to be working. We worked real hard to make sure that all of them believed in what we were saying and what we were doing. We weren't trying to take advantage of them or anybody else for that matter.

The last real bad situation was funding. That was tough. But we just kind of got real quiet. They would argue back and forth. I'd watch to see who won, and I agreed with them. No, I'm just kidding. It really is something though. It was something for us to look at.

Now, there was another one that was a trend of what we're doing and what we have done, and that is tech.

MT: Right, an excellent point. Again, let me kind of give you my broad sense of the story, and you can tell me. So, a lot of things happened in higher education over the time you served. One of them was the move to bring the community colleges and technical colleges under the Board of Regents, and then even beyond that, at least in some cases, merging the technical colleges with a university or higher education institution. I gather the theory was some efficiency, some better coordination. What was the situation like when you came to Topeka in terms of your relationship with technical education? What were the changes you made that really brought your institutions together?

JF: First of all, I don't think it's some of those universities wanted to have any new, any kind of education. That was tough for us to do for a while. Then we figured out that they didn't really have a lot of programs that we could look at and improve upon and do it real carefully. So, they started to break down a little bit and ease their way off of it, and finally they decided we could let you take over tech. I said, "Well, you know, I think we could do that. I'm not sure, but we'll really give it a try." And they did a great job.

We agreed at the beginning that the things that they would do or the things that we would do not adversely keep someone on our campus or on the tech campus. We didn't want it to impair anyone from what they would receive. A most unusual situation around we were signing agreements with people so that they could stay out of having problems when they earned things, money paid out, we would pay it to them, and then we'd pay it to our faculty for them. That has worked out phenomenally, and it has grown tremendously. Of all of the things that have had around the university, I think there's a lot of people at Washburn that have worked really, really hard doing new things and doing things that are important. But it was up to them.

MT: Most of my work has been in the K-12 area, working with the school boards, but I've done in the last few years, writing stories and things. Here in Topeka, I think it's been very striking, the emphasis that that USD 501 has placed on developing tech ed programs, CTE programs.

JF: Right.

MT: More students being able to access those in high school and then having that relationship with Washburn as well as with private sector and everything else. From my observation over the last twenty-five years or so, it's really a difference on how we view trying to give students who are not immediately interested in going directly to a four-year institution a chance to start in some of these other areas. It seems to me that that coordination is really different than it was before.

JF: It's totally different. They would be able to look at what they've been thinking about doing and go to tech first. Then they would go to a regular school. It was important that they'd be able to do that. They'd go back to tech and finish that thing up. It was incredible. I'm real happy for them.

MT: It's interesting going around the state how often I hear people talk about the demand for welding, something I didn't think of as one growing up, but how popular that is with a lot of

students because they do see it was a way to a skilled, well-paying job, an important job, a job you really can't outsource because you've got to do the welding here for the most part. I guess that's interesting how again that transformation from whatever an institution like Washburn thought of itself at the time now really embracing that teaching welding and other CTE programs really as part of that mission if you're going to support your community.

JF: The words that you used, that they have the opportunity to do one or both ways, and because they could do that, they could pay for one or the other. And it turned out to be a phenomenal program.

MT: Another thing I'd like to ask you a little bit about, if you had any thoughts—we're having this visit in early 2025. I don't know when people will view this, but a lot of interest or a lot of discussion, debate around the federal role of education. In your work at Washburn or through higher education, did you have much interaction at the federal level in terms of funding or other policies?

JF: Not much. Most of—and I'd been in higher ed--much of what I'd seen was happening was with the ISS, no, it can't be ISS, at any rate, they have to do something now. It's some kind of—I can't think of the word at the moment. But they have to do all that work for the government and get paid for that, for research particularly.

MT: Okay, research.

JF: And it is important that that's the case, and maybe what's going to be happening in DC now on un-funding things—I saw that several universities had to back away from some of the things that they were doing just because they didn't have the money to do it.

MT: That I think will be a bit of a challenge, of course. One of the things that I'm sure Washburn dealt with like many institutions is most states, and Kansas is one of them, tended to not fund higher ed in the way they had in the past which really means the responsibility either has to roll down to the student or roll down to the local government which may mean property tax and the same thing with the federal government has sort of struggled with the best way to support or not support and what sort of strings to attach.

So, one of the things I'm sure you dealt with was how do you widen opportunities for students at a time when you may not be able to rely on the public funding that was there in the past? I think in your case, you were involved in a lot of fundraising around, everything from scholarships to raising money for facilities.

JF: We do two things. We try to provide jobs coming out of school, out of university or technical school, and then have the money there to help go through them. Then the other thing is to have a more robust program in fundraising. We've got a lot of great stars here on our campus in Washburn that have done a great job. We just had a great announcement a few weeks ago. It's going to be somebody else going to be getting that money. We think that's going to be a particularly difficult problem.

MT: So, a growing responsibility for a presidency or leading an institution is how you're able to access private fundraising to supplement maybe to a larger extent than was there in the past. I suppose again, kind of looking at your background, a key piece of what you had to do was really figure out how you connect to the community and maybe specifically local as a somewhat local institution, but you're also trying to draw students from across the state. So, a big part of I guess your role has to be, how do you as an individual and as an institution effectively communicate with the public, with parents, with students, people who have money as possible fundraisers? I imagine that was a big challenge as part of your responsibility when you were president.

JF: Well, it is, and it isn't. It is—you have to do it. You have to be out there talking with people. You have to be with people. But also you have to make sure that what you're doing is useful. They have to see something from it.

We had a gift about a month ago, and it was fifty million dollars. That's a pretty good sum. The problem that you have is you got to have somebody that does want to have whatever it is that you have. You've got to be flexible enough that there's somebody out there that wants to do something. That person that I was talking about earlier, they wanted to be a welder. He might have a huge company by now because he had that behind now and knew what it was, what it took, and that's when I think it's going to be really ready for that kind of activity.

MT: So, all of this is just connecting what you're trying to do looking forward to. How does it have an impact on individual lives? And if you can help them be successful, that's part of it.

JF: Then come visit us.

MT: Yes, exactly. Let me give you a chance maybe, is there something I missed that maybe you're particularly proud of? Of course, you can also share disappointments. That's okay, too. Sometimes we learn from that. But I guess kind of looking back on the time you spent in that role, the time you spent in Kansas, anything I've missed that you want to stress as we wrap up?

JF: I actually don't think so because I've been in this business for a long time. Start thinking about things that are really important. Make sure that you're delivering the ideas that you want them to understand and then want you to make sure that you are doing this in a way that makes a big difference, and it is. It's a big difference.

MT: Dr. Farley, thank you so much for sharing your information. We certainly want to thank people viewing this or reading about this and the ability to be—everyone involved in the Oral History Project so that we can share this. Thank you and thank you for inviting us into your home.

JF: Glad to have you here and to be with you.

MT: Sure.

[End of File]

