

Joan Wagnon: The date is November 13, 2020 at 11:00 a.m. in Topeka, Kansas, and we're conducting this interview on Zoom with Sheila Frahm at her current home in Arizona. Senator Frahm has served on the State Board of Education. She was the Majority Leader in the Kansas State Senate, a Lieutenant Governor of Kansas, and a United States Senator from Kansas. Sheila, welcome. This is just really wonderful that we can talk to you this way.

I'm Joan Wagnon. I'm President of the Kansas Oral History Project and a retired legislator and a former Secretary of Revenue. I'm assisted by Mary Galligan, retired Associate Director from Kansas Legislative Research, who is also a member on our Board. We're conducting this interview on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, a not-for-profit corporation created to interview former legislators and significant state leaders, particularly those who served in the 1960s through 2000. These interviews will be accessible for researchers and educators, and we are grateful to the Humanities Kansas for giving us a grant to pay for transcriptions.

Next, let's hear a little bit about who Sheila Frahm is. Sheila was a lifelong resident of Colby, Thomas County Kansas, during her years of service. She graduated from Colby Community High School in 1963. She received a Bachelor of Science degree from Fort Hays State University in 1967. She attended the University of Texas at Austin. She chaired the Colby Public School's Board of Education. She chaired the Northwest Kansas Educational Service Center Board of Education. She was appointed to the Kansas Board of Education in 1985, elected in 1986, served as Vice Chair in 1987. Sheila, does that sound about right?

Sheila Frahm: Very good. Thank you.

JW: Let's talk a little about your legislative career. Senator Frahm was elected to the Kansas Senate in 1988. She served from the 1989 session through the '94 session. She was the Majority Leader in '93 and '94, when she was elected Lieutenant Governor of Kansas in 1994. Governor Bill Graves, her running mate, appointed her Secretary of Administration in 1995, and then on June 11, 1996, she was appointed to the United States Senate to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of Senator Bob Dole. She served from June 11, 1996 to November 5, 1996, when a successor to that full term was elected. She then served as Executive Director of the Kansas Association of Community Colleges.

Sheila, your committee assignments in the Senate were pretty interesting. You were the Vice Chair and also the Chair of Administrative Rules and Regulations. How did that work? Did you all switch with the House or something that you kept rotating the chairmanship back and forth?

SF: Representative, friend, Joan, nice to be with you. Thank you. The Rules and Regs is one of the joint committees between the House and the Senate, and leadership rotates between the House and the Senate. So every other year I was Chair.

JW: You were Vice Chair of Education the entire time that you served in the Senate.

SF: That's correct. That was something very important to me.

JW: How did you manage to get that chairmanship? As a freshman legislator, that was kind of interesting.

SF: Well, it was. I looked at the committees that I thought would be most useful to my Senate district, the rural district of northwest Kansas, twelve counties. So I asked for Agriculture, of course. I'm a farmer. So are my people. The Energy and Natural Resources Committee, I was very concerned about taxes, as we all are. So I asked for Tax Committee. Nobody has more local governments than I did in that local Senate district. I also served on the Local Government Committee. So those were the committees I asked for plus I asked to be Vice Chair of the Education Committee. One of the other women elected that same year, a colleague of hers who had served in the Senate, said, "You know, ladies, you're responsible for helping keep your majority in the Kansas Senate. You need to tell those leaders what you want." We did!

Well, we took that literally. Senator Lana Oleen asked for a vice chairmanship of her committee, and I asked for Vice Chairman of the Education Committee. The day that then Majority Leader Fred Kerr called and said, "Great. Sheila, congratulations, again, and you can have all the committees you asked for, and yes, you can be Vice Chair of the Education Committee, but" — and I sort of held my breath. He said, "But we want you to chair the Rules and Regs Committee." I'd never heard of the Rules and Regs Committee. So I said, "Okay, great." There we are. And I began right away as the Senate started.

JW: You had a close-up look chairing that committee at every facet of state government, did you not?

SF: When you say "that committee," absolutely. I can't tell you how many times I have explained to someone like you or someone from a newspaper or some kids who come to visit that the Rules and Regs Committee is responsible for working to facilitate the process that's going to carry out the laws that we've enacted. That means every agency bringing their leadership, be it the Secretary or the Director or whatever, the agency will come often with their attorney and their lead staff, and they'll explain their rules and regs. Rules and regulations are how they're going to carry out the law.

I could have not had a better explanation of the government in the state of Kansas than serving on that committee and having opportunities to see all of those leaders come before us from the administrative and judicial agencies to tell us what their plans were and how they were going to make them work. Often we would be able to say, "Could you tweak that just a little?" and probably that would happen. Bottom line, we didn't have authority to require them to change their rules and regs, but they knew all we had to do was introduce a piece of legislation the next year that would change what the law said, and they'd have to change their rules and regs. We had a bit of authority and pleasantly worked with them. Gosh, I just learned everything I needed to know in that process.

JW: That was probably also very helpful to you when you got to be the Secretary of Administration and working as closely as you did with Governor Graves.

SF: Yes. I brought some administrative understanding that probably no one else in the governor's cabinet could have. They knew their own agency, but I had a pretty broad—I could remember one of our newly appointed secretaries was kind of trying to process something through, and he wasn't understanding. But later he asked me, "How did you know that?" and I said, "Well, here's my Rules and Regulations Committee story."

JW: I think that's a wonderful introduction then to the kind of things that you did as a public servant. I'd like to back up a little bit, if we could, and have you talk a little bit about your life before you entered the legislature. I'm interested particularly in whether your family had been interested in politics before you ran for the School Board. I know your family business was farming, right?

SF: That's correct.

JW: What was your incentive for getting involved in public service?

SF: I'm going to back up just a little to the beginning of your sentence. What's my history? You said in the introduction, "a lifelong resident of Thomas County in Colby." That's true. I was born and raised in Colby, as were my parents, as were my grandparents. And my great-grandparents all came there on their own in various ways. In fact, all of those generations, from Ken and I, my husband Ken, and our parents, my grandparents, and all of my great-grandparents farmed at some time in Thomas County. Acknowledging certainly, some were more successful farmers than others, but that's my heritage. I was a farm kid and proud of it. That mean we worked hard. It meant we understood—there wasn't very often an extra five cents to add to the allowance for the week, but we also had, looking back, a really, really good life. That's the kind of heritage I bring. Ken, as I said, his family was also in agriculture, and he was also, as a fifteen year old, very tall, and so was I. I picked him out in the hallway, and I've kept him for some fifty-five years.

That's an important part of who I am because supportive parents, and, yes, my father helped with the consolidation in our county. That's no small deal because you're working with and for and sometimes against your friends. Then he served on the Colby Community College Board of Trustees, as did my in-laws. I kind of knew about being involved.

But the reason I ran for school board wasn't because of a long-time dream to be in politics or to run for anything, necessarily. But AAUW was doing some research, and I agreed, "I'll go talk to the superintendent who used to my principal, and I'll figure out this budget question that we had." I took the papers along, and I had my questions prepared, and that fellow who I adored and respected had the audacity to tell me I couldn't understand it anyway.

I only needed that challenge to file for school board. We all as elected officials can recognize you win some and lose some. I won the primary in my first try, and I lost the election. Two years later, there's another opportunity, and I was then elected to the local school board.

In a nutshell, yes, we're a farm family, a great way to raise our kids. We had the opportunity to be away from Colby and Thomas County for about ten years after college, which allows one to establish yourself beyond your parents, to join your own church, to buy your own house, to start your kids in school. That was a neat part of our early life after college.

JW: Sheila, there was an interview done by Sara Tucker, who was a professor at Washburn University in 1991. I'm pretty sure I sent you a copy of that interview.

SF: Yes, you did. Thank you.

JW: There are some delightful stories about your early background in that interview. What we will do is post that interview from '91 along with this interview, and it will have all of that early color about your being a farm wife and how you looked at farming, and how you looked at some of those things. So I think what I'll do is kind of skip on to your political campaigns, although you had one statement in there that really stuck in my mind. If I can read you just a little bit of this. You were going to something called a hog roast, the annual hog roast for the Kansas Association of School Boards. I think at this point, you must have been on the Colby school board, and you said, *"Because I was a member of their legislative committee, I began to be interested obviously in what was happening in Topeka. And I learned that our local State Board of Education [member] would be resigning. I had thirty days and sixty-four voters,"* and you went after each and every one of those and got yourself elected to the State Board [of Education]. Did you approach politics in that same organized way throughout all of those campaigns that you ran?

SF: Absolutely. I very much took the philosophy, and I'm sure I was advised by others who maybe I can't even remember when and who, but made the impression that you've got to eyeball face to face with your voters, and that's kind of tricky in twelve counties and scattered-out farm families. I felt like I needed to knock on what I considered to be every door, starting with just absolutely only sixty-four voters, and it was an appointment. It was done by the chairman and co-chairman of each of those counties. So I absolutely knew who they were.

I couldn't necessarily get to every one of those in a month in that wide distance because that's thirty-four counties. So one of them I knew worked and in fact owned a savings and loan, just as an example. Well, don't you think for a moment the savings and loans people in Colby didn't call that individual on my behalf? We went through that in all of those same manners. I also knew a school board member in many of their counties. A call from the local school board saying, "Hey, I've worked with Sheila Frahm. I would encourage you to consider her strongly for this State Board position to represent all of us in western Kansas."

Each state school board position represents four Senate districts. That was the background of how that election worked. Now when you go to a caucus for an appointment like this, there's going to be one vote, and people are going to support whomever they're committed to. So I made it through that first vote. Then there were just two of us. There's a better part of this story. I ultimately did win because people then no longer had to support their first commitment. So I got the votes.

But the individual who got the second number of votes was also a school board member. I would like to just say to the world he was the most incredible guy. He became a lifetime friend. He was not angry that he did not win. He was behind me 100 percent and was available to help me throughout my entire [career] following political opportunities.

So elections can be challenging. They can be exciting. That one was not expensive, just a few stamps and a lot of phone calls but a lot of hard work, and the results and the friendships that can result are marvelous.

JW: That's a great story. We are interviewing a lot of women in this oral history series. We're interviewing you because of all the things you did in the legislature, but also because you had had that earlier interview. One of the things that we've been looking at is the kind of special accommodations that families had to make after you won office. You commented in that 1991 interview that Ken and your daughter moved to Topeka during this session. How difficult was it to readjust to the distance you had to travel? You're way up there in Colby and the disruptions in your routine and your farming business. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

SF: Yes. That was an exciting—I probably overuse the word “exciting” but it was just downright fun. It would have been hard to leave Ken and Chrissie at that time, a third grader, in Colby. We had adopted Chrissie. She's younger than our older daughters. At that point, Daughter #1 was a law student at KU. Daughter #2 was a student at K State. They were settled in two additional apartments that we were supporting. Why wouldn't we want to get another place to take care of also beyond the home in Colby? I say that kind of with a chuckle because you all know college kids and growing families.

For our youngest daughter, and I say to you that Chrissie is vision impaired. It was an extra challenge for her, but the bottom-line bonus of her going between Colby and Topeka schools was the opportunity to work with the vision specialists, the special ed teachers who had that specialty across the entire state because we went south with my district for the School Board. We went to Topeka. We went to Kansas City. She had opportunity to tap more expertise than we would have had we had been just in Colby with our excellent one teacher who tried to cover all the things.

We moved from Colby right after Christmas. So we were in Topeka sooner than any other legislator, which gave me opportunity to work in my office and get ready for the session, but it gave her a chance to start school immediately after Christmas, rather than kicking in in the

middle of January. She said to me the second year she had to come, “Mom, I’m not so scared this year because I know where my classroom is, and I know what books I’m going to use,” and I said, “Chrissie, I feel exactly the same way because I know where my office is, and I know where my books are.” I think she sort of understood that, even as a youngster.

From January to March, early April, Ken is going to be doing computer work. He’s going to be doing office work, not very much going on in the field. So it was possible for him to be in Topeka during that time. Sometimes the weather in Topeka was marvelous those three months of the year, and he could even play golf daily. He met some great retired fellows to play with—it just was good for our family.

I think we added extra challenge to Chrissie’s life, but we also created opportunities that there could not have been. You don’t know that sort of thing. One session, she boarded at the State School for the Blind in Kansas City during the week, and they taught her Braille. Braille had not been working very well in rural northwest Kansas because the teacher only saw her once a week. Well, you learn a couple of things, and by the next week, Chrissie was totally frustrated with Braille. But they agreed at the State School, “Yes, we know Chrissie. We know you will support her. If she’ll keep up with her other academics,” which she could do, “we’ll teach her Braille in three months,” and they did.

JW: That’s a really good story.

SF: What an opportunity.

JW: I remember meeting Chrissie. She seemed to be thriving on being involved with her mom up at the legislature. I remember looking up in the gallery and seeing Ken with the legislative wives occasionally.

SF: Yes.

JW: Let’s shift gears a little bit into the different race. You’ve been in the legislature now from ’88 to ’94. What led you to decide to run for Lieutenant Governor with Bill Graves? Did you have any reservations about leaving [Senators are in mid-term] the Senate to run for that office? It probably was a sure thing but not necessarily.

SF: There was certainly no guarantee, not a sure thing. You’re right about that, as it turned out. But I can recall thinking back. Bill [Graves] was someone I knew. Of course, I’d seen him in the State House. I wouldn’t call him a good friend at that point, but I would say certainly when he called and said, “I’d like to stop by your house,” that was in Colby, I said, “Super.” Joan, I did not realize at the time he was coming to say, “I’d like you to consider running with me.” I absolutely—zing. I did not know what he was doing. So I thanked him for visiting, and he left. We had a good chat, of course, but was I dense. My goodness, yes.

Ultimately it took his staff and my staff to have several little chats to figure out that Sheila might be more receptive than she acted if she'd have known what was going on.

SF: In those early days, we didn't have those kind of phones and that kind of electronics benefits. It was different for sure. Ultimately, yes, I had to decide if giving up a position in the Kansas Senate, and I delighted in being a Majority Leader, and the privilege of making sure everything ran smoothly in the Kansas Senate. Organization is my forte. So it is easy to do. Ultimately Bill and I did decide that we would form a team and run together. Statewide, it's a little hard to touch every door and every voter, but I'd had some experience with windshield time. I think we made a good team.

JW: You certainly brought a lot of balance to that ticket. He was from Salina, which is still in the middle of the state, but you had a district and had run several times in a large swath of western Kansas. What about the US Senate race against Brownback? Was the prize worth the risk?

SF: Yes. Sometimes the question is phrased, "Why did you give up being Lieutenant Governor?" You could be Senator just to fill in the rest of the term, and that's an experience. Not very many people get to serve in the United States Senate, and what was required to additionally run. It was a little bit like the Superintendent saying, "Sheila, you can't do it." Yes, I could put everything together, and, yes, I could give it my best.

That was the final election, of course, and as I already said to you, I lost my first and I lost my last elections, but that's part of what politics is about in the electoral democratic process. I wouldn't do it differently, looking back, unless it was to win, but the challenges they had, maybe I was better back in Kansas. I don't know.

I should correct and say I was not a Trustee of the Kansas Association of Community Colleges. I was their Executive Director. For twelve years after the United States Senate, I worked then with the nineteen community colleges as their Executive Director. We can talk about that, but I knew it was extremely important to have the nineteen community colleges speak with one voice because I'd seen them have trouble in the legislature coming before us and obviously had that privilege to work with.

Somebody said, "Sheila, it's so much easier." I said, "I'm working for nineteen community college presidents and their trustees. Do you think that's easy?" No. It was not easy, but bringing the background I did even from the federal level because community colleges were being talked about by every presidential candidate. And then every president wanted to be sure that students who couldn't access a university because of their age—they were mostly older students—because of the cost, because of the distance.

Once again, though I didn't necessarily enjoy losing that election for sure, that dirty, rotten, nasty election, but having a trustee visit while I was there saying, "You know, Sheila, when you're finished with this, I think there's nineteen community"—well, it was already in my mind

to think, "How do we go the next step?" There's always been a door open, and as I say to young people, "You're doing what you're doing. You think about your future, but something's going to come your way."

First you have to recognize it. I told you, I almost missed that with Bill Graves. Then you have to also be willing to step through that door to take the risk and give it a try. So this sort of illustrates that story that I tell kids at graduation or individually.

JW: That's why I asked the question, "Was the prize worth the risk?" In your legislative career, you had been very identified with championing major changes for community colleges. Selecting you as the Executive Director, and I apologize for having—

SF: I should have corrected that before.

JW: That's okay. Anyway, but having that come out next was a perfect way for you to continue that legacy of service that you have created, but it's always a risk, and the higher you get, I think the question you have to ask is, "Was the prize worth the risk?"

SF: Absolutely. I wouldn't trade it for anything. You know who I got to serve with, right? I mean, stop and think about if Bob [Dole] resigned, our Bob who had served Kansas his entire life and always took care of things, and suddenly decided he was going to run full time for president, and gave his governor about two hours' notice. So I had an hour and forty-five minutes' notice. That's not the usual Bob Dole, but he had other things on his mind, and he served with Senator Nancy Kassebaum, our other senator.

JW: And you served with Nancy Kassebaum.

SF: I did. Trying to fill Bob's shoes, which everyone acknowledged was an impossible task meant that I got to serve with a mentor and dear, dear friend during that time, and Nancy was, of course, very, very supportive. Frankly, she would have preferred that I not be running. She just thought that was too, too much, but then she kind of knew me, too. So she wasn't really surprised.

It was extraordinary opportunity to serve in the United States Senate with Nancy Kassebaum. There were two senators from California, two women. We sort of made up that—we balanced each other in many ways. I noticed during this recent election that there are two women from New Mexico, and I had not picked up on that. I had not kept absolute close track, I guess. Nancy and I, certainly that was the first time that sort of thing had happened from Kansas, and quite a treat.

JW: I think it would be an unimaginable opportunity that you would take the opportunity. The decision to run was one that you made. Anyway, enough said about that race.



SF: And thank you for Bill Graves for giving me the opportunity.

JW: Absolutely.

SF: He said, "Sheila, it's yours if you want it." "I think I'll think about it a moment or two."

JW: Let's go back to the Senate, the State Senate. One of the questions that we have asked of all of the people we've interviewed, whether they were male or female, old guys, young guys, all got the same question. Personal identity is loosely defined as gender, age, race, class, sexual, or gender orientation, marital status, so on. Did you experience times during your time in the legislature where you believe your personal identity influenced your ability to pass policy, work with fellow legislators, or provide constituent services? Were you ever given a committee assignment or a task that you believe were functions of your personal identity?

SF: That's heavy. A large part of personal identity, I was sort of middle of the road, female, about forty, a little over forty, tall, healthy, educated. I kind of fit that general category. But I was from western Kansas. I was from Colby. I was identified with rural Kansas, and I don't think there was any question about that.

But I could go to in those statewide races and ask for a show of hands. "How many of you in this large group in Johnson County, how many of you are one or two generations away from western Kansas?" I said, "First, how many of your parents came? How many of you just came?" Lots of hands. "How many of your grandparents came to eastern Kansas from western Kansas?" Unfortunately, we do lose population. We still have the farmers to take care of things at this point, but my reason for saying that is because they needed to understand they had—"Just don't forget you have west Kansas roots and ties, and that's the bread-basket." It gave me a way to share with other parts of the state. I wasn't alone in knowing those things were important to our state. They also understood, even though they now lived in another part of the state.

So that was part of what allowed me to move forward with legislative issues that were important, not only to western Kansas, and sometimes only important to western Kansas, and as you know, sometimes important to just a small section of western Kansas, like the Rattlesnake bill. We'll come back to that. We don't have time. That will just be a tidbit for someone to think about.

When it came time to—for example, a task that I wasn't sure I could accomplish—should I run for Majority Leader? Well, you've got to have one more vote than the other guy or other gal. It turned out I didn't have any competition in the race, but I had a lot of competition before the final race, before the final vote of the race. Our eastern Kansas friends had been in control of the Senate since Senator "Bud" Burke, our good friend, was President and continued to be President. It looked like he would continue for another term. I think they knew very well. Senator Bogina chaired Ways and Means. They weren't going to get another leadership

position. It just wasn't going to work. They weren't necessarily working with the other urban areas of the state, and so, golly, we must need to have someone—if I could get the votes of a large urban area like that, and I was able to. They were sort of my buddies and friends.

There was a time when—early in my career, I do not remember the issue—but I can remember saying to them, “You guys are voting no on this issue? You guys, every one of you from Johnson County.” It was not an issue that made one bit of difference for them. It did not affect their district. They just had always voted no on that kind of issue. I said, “It is important to my district, and we're not going to pass it without your votes. So is there any reason you couldn't vote yes?” There was a momentary pause and a couple of little grins. I met with them all as a group. “Yes, Sheila, you're right. It doesn't make any difference to us, and we'll be happy to help you.” That's a little bit of background as to maybe why I could go to them. They could come to me. We could work through—“Sheila, if you run, we'll support you.”

JW: I think it's a great answer to the question, and I think the legislature in many respects still works that way today. They look at who you are, and that in many cases dictates what you're able to do in terms of committee assignments or other things. That's not all it dictates, but it has a role.

SF: If I was standing behind my chair with my mic in my hand—that's the way we communicated when I was a Senator—probably the Chamber would know we were going to talk about education or farming or maybe a natural resources issue. That's probably what I would be standing to address. And I was addressed, by the way, as “the Senator from Thomas” because we were recognized by our home county.

JW: Sheila, did that not change over time that they saw you in an increasingly broader light, other than just the Senator from Thomas?

SF: I think so, but it was important for a statewide race, the identity of where I was from and my roots and my upbringing and thus my ethics and my determination was going to be evident because of that. The issues that I identified—education, farming, resources—those were important, but everybody talked and voted on the appropriations bills. “We're going to decide how to spend the money.”

Someone said to me once, “Sheila, you don't say very much, but when you say it, you say it really quickly, and that's good, and you say it so we can understand it, and that's good, and I really appreciate the way you do it.” Well, I never exactly thought about what I did, but I probably sat and pondered and needed to be sure I understood. I wasn't going to stand up and look foolish. Then I was a bit brisk. I had an administrative assistant who had to sometimes tell people after the fact, “Her bark is worse than her bite.” I sort of had to learn those kinds of things. But I think I was who I was, and that didn't change from day to day.

JW: Let's shift gears a little bit and look at policy issues in the legislature. You were there from '89 to '94. Those were six years that were incredibly productive for policy development in the legislature as a whole. As I look back through the legislative courts, we had a major overhaul in school finance. We had a state water plan, a new highway plan, a new economic development strategy, banking reform, criminal justice reform. It was a long list of major initiatives. What were the big policy issues that you got involved in?

SF: Well, of course, school finance, and that came back to bite me later, actually because it was possible for a campaign opponent to add together the total of school finance in each of the bills that came through that we accepted or didn't accept as the total spending, making me a big spender. That sort of caught me unawares because it made me think back, "Why did we have so many school finance bills?" There were two issues. It's the most difficult issue we're ever going to face, and we'll continue to face school finance in Kansas. I always depended on my expertise from what I could learn from Dale Dennis. You know that as well as many, many, many legislators know the State of Kansas will now function without that kind of Mr. School Finance.

School Finance was two parts. It was the policy of what was going to be done to distribute the dollars in what format, and who was going to get it. Of course, we always had printouts to see that. The other side of it was funding it. It seemed extremely important to me—Senator Harder was Chair of the Education Committee, and he also was on Ways and Means, and that was an unusual opportunity that he had because of his many years of experience and tenure. He could work on the funding side, and, of course, he knew the policy, but I said, "Senator Joe, we've got to tie those two together. We can't let people vote to support the policy and then vote no on the funding so they can go home and say, 'See what we've got you.'" These were my good colleagues and friends, but people sometimes get in that kind of situation where they can have the opportunity to do good, but not spend.

So having those tied together made us look at many, many, many—I can't tell you how many scenarios. You were there. You can probably think that, too. But why did we bring them to the floor if we didn't think we had twenty-one votes? Because it needed to be talked about. They needed to see what was going to happen. It was an issue important to the entire legislature, the entire state of Kansas, at that time, all 304 school districts, not just the Education Committee.

Sometimes and initially as we progress through it, we looked at the funding costs and the way to implement many, many times, but they were always tied together. It made it difficult, but I think it was the very best way to have changed the way we distributed dollars, and took care of small districts, knowing that we have them in our state, took care of special needs, financial or, for example, special ed, transportation, the kind of components that were important to individual school districts. And, once again, those large school districts in eastern Kansas, they couldn't vote yea or nay just because it was going to help them without working for the rest of the state because there weren't enough votes to do it from the large schools or the small

schools. The small schools, rural Kansas continues to lose representation with population decline. That will be an ongoing issue. Reapportionment is part of that.

But schools, they're the heart of the community, so extremely important. I get a little excited when I talk about how we had to do, the process just to get that change in school finance. And, by the way, we did have the court, the Supreme Court of the State of Kansas, looking over our shoulders. Judge Bullock was going to get it moved higher if things weren't his way, the way he thought it should be.

JW: My recollection was, of course, I was sitting on the House side at that time.

SF: Yes, you were.

JW: Chairing the Tax Committee, trying to marry the funding mechanism to the policy that was there. Your explanation of how the school finance debate changed after that '92 school finance bill passed is just excellent. But there was more to funding for education. You started talking about several buckets. Talk a little bit about higher ed and talk a little bit about the community colleges. My recollection of your service is that the changes for community colleges were a huge major policy change and a very successful one.

SF: The largest probably came while I was Executive Director, but we were working up towards it. I didn't know that then. You don't always know what's in the future. Our district tuition was always the issue that came down to funding for community colleges, and eighteen counties were paying so much of the cost for community college education in the state of Kansas for those students. The County Commissioners in the other counties were not happy with having to pay out district tuition. So don't think that wasn't a balance for me with twelve counties, my home county having a community college and all the Commissioners in the other counties having to pay out district tuition until I explained to them again—they didn't understand local community college county costs, and so then they quit griping at me. Usually, that's a good example of constituent service because if people understand a little bit better beyond their initial bias, ill-informed though it may be, they're happy to be informed, and to work with it.

So the community college funding was critical. The legislature needed to also understand with nineteen community colleges, and we also had x number—at that time, I don't remember the number, but approximately twelve or thirteen technical schools who were totally funded by the state, providing one-year and two-year education, and the universities, while they maintained their high-on-the-hill attitude, they still were dependent on the students from the community college and the technical schools.

We're also building up to when, many years later, we'd finally have all of higher education at the Board of Regents. One of the steps was to determine the funding for community colleges. Obviously, I had that interest long before I knew it was going to be my primary interest. Those big issues are critical. I, too, had an opportunity to look back at some of the bills. In my first

year, now Triple Trailers, if I would say that to 125 legislators, I think most of them would look at me with like, "What is she talking about?"

If you think about it, you don't see trucks pulling three trailers across the state of Kansas, but in order for companies to be able to continue to go from where they needed to be out of Missouri and out of Colorado, they needed to be able to adjust just a little. So trucks, ultimately the compromise lap if you will, but they could come into Goodland, which is the town farthest west, and they could park, it turns out in a hotel, a motel parking lot and switch down to two trailers. The same thing happened. They were allowed to circle around the interstate cloverleaves in eastern Kansas to a location, yes, in the state of Kansas, but where they could reload the trucks. So the triples came to Kansas, and the companies were able to come to a compromise. We could agree they could slip into Kansas, reload, and head back to pick up that second triple trailer load and come across the state of Kansas with just two trailers.

Does anybody care? We were worried about our roads. It was a big deal. We couldn't get it through the legislature, we didn't figure. It did affect my district.

JW: It affected drivers up and down the highway. Constituencies differ from your point of view. I'm not saying that very clearly. Your point of view changes in how you see your constituency. If your constituency is drivers who don't want to encounter those—I never got so many complaints about triple trailers as anything else.

SF: And they didn't really stop to think that—look at the safety statistics. Look at the accident statistics. It's just that they heard triple trailer and the headline in the newspaper said "crisis," so they were against it automatically. Well, we worked out a deal. Frequently leadership will say to the disagreeing groups—it may be one or two, or it may be a whole big mass—"You all go sit down. Work this through. Come back with a recommendation" because if you don't have the support of both or multi-sides, you're never going to get legislation passed.

We can do that in the state of Kansas. It may be harder in other states. We have homegrown legislators. We have people who are from here most or all their life. That's different from some other states to have what we might call "carpetbaggers" coming in who don't have maybe the same—and we're small. We don't have a lot of people. Our issues are pretty much the same year after year. We do some big things, as you identified. We don't do a highway plan every year. We don't revise the criminal justice system every year. But some of those things come up in some form every year. We build a new prison or we don't. We privatize or we don't. You can kind of count on some, but there's always little things like triple trailers or I can't even think of another one that seems so unimportant.

I know. Sunday liquor sales.

JW: Yes.

SF: That's the only time I can recall having my name written in an ad sent out to my district, and it was because some people wanted to close their stores, but others didn't. It was within their own industry. But I had a position, and I didn't change.

JW: I chuckled on that because those are the kind of issues that tie up the mail in your office, tie up the phones in your office, and cause you difficulty when you go out into the public because they all have an idea about what ought to be the solution. But it's people working on them behind the scenes to make them happen, and you're agreeing with that, I see.

SF: I am, totally. In your legislative district, right there in Topeka, you were more like what I was in Colby with the school board. You run into people at the grocery store. When I was in Topeka and you were in Topeka with the legislature, your constituents didn't talk to me about it. They didn't know me.

JW: But they sure found me wherever I was. In fact, some of them still call.

SF: Oh, absolutely.

JW: That I would be interested in knowing their thoughts.

SF: That's interesting. Not only that, Joan, they still call and say, "Sheila, probably you can't help with this, but who do I call?" Our constituent services is still—even though I live now out of state, I guess I take some pride in that. It's weird, and, no, I can't help. I don't know who the people are anymore, but what a privilege to have served those people.

JW: I completely agree with you on that. You help them every time you can. I don't want this to extend too long because I don't want you to get tired with this interview, but I do have a couple of other questions that I want to get to.

SF: Go ahead.

JW: One of them has to do with working with Governor's Offices. We again asked this question of many of the interviewees. You worked with Governor Mike Hayden and Governor Joan Finney during your legislative time and, of course, with Governor Bill Graves as his Lieutenant Governor and Secretary of Administration. How do Governor's Offices interact with the legislature on these issues? Is there any lesson that you've learned from that about what a governor should do?

SF: I have mixed thoughts about that. Thinking back as a legislator, I wondered why the governors stayed in their office and sent a legislative liaison or the head of that agency that was impacted by the bill. I still don't know the answer to that question totally, but I can reflect, yes, on those three governors with delight.

Mike Hayden, of course, was from Atwood, Kansas, which was part of my Senate district at that time. I was his senator, and, of course, he was my governor. Once in a while, I even got to hop a ride on the plane back home to western Kansas. But Ken had to pick me up in Atwood because Mike wouldn't land the plane in Colby. We had to do it right. In that era, we did things correctly. So it was easy for me to work with Governor Mike and his staff, and I was a new legislator at that time, of course, a new senator, and I depended on them for some learning. Once in a while, it would be an issue that they would think I could talk to colleagues about, although I was enough of a greenhorn that that was not often, but that sort of began to build the rural western Kansas expertise and identity. So probably enough on Mike. We can probably remember his people who came to the committees, "Mike's going to get it done in his way." You can just remember. As an aside, I think of Mike and his father, Mr. Hayden, because Mr. Hayden said, "You must be near water every day to maintain your health." I love fountains. I love streams. I love water. I'm not so big a fan of oceans. They're kind of noisy and sandy, but that's the real Western Kansas.

Governor Finney was a different deal. Yes, she was a woman. She wasn't as approachable by legislators, at least from my perspective, but it was not a concern to me because Senator Francisco, my former colleague in the Senate, had become her Lieutenant Governor. So I always knew who to go talk to, and that I think is how I would identify what the governors do. Legislators know someone on their staff, or legislators know the back door to a specific issue. They know how an agency can bring forth the support of lack of support for something that's important to their district, to the state of Kansas, whatever is coming forth. I'm not speaking of a certain issue, but certainly Lieutenant Governor Jim, I identified him as important because we as senators knew him. I in particular can recall talking to him on occasion where if he had the governor's ear better than I did, maybe my issue could move forward.

With Governor Bill, I certainly had the opportunity to help choose the people that would work with the legislature. The importance of sometimes being patient could be emphasized to a governor when you're sitting a little closer to them. Understanding that school finance isn't going to happen with the first iteration and try. Well, why not? That's just not the way it works. Take my word for it.

Creating the budget is an important part of what the Governor's Offices do. That was critical to us, and getting the State of the State message, and getting a hold of the actual document. We had a briefing but getting a hold of the actual document and beginning the process, working with our financial staff budget director was also very, very important. And Governor Bill kept the budget director from Governor Finney. That was a little unusual, but very, very important to the continuation and successful financing for our state.

JW: Was that Gloria Timmer?

SF: Exactly, yes. That was very important to creating budgets, particularly in the early years of the Graves administration. And I mentioned Senator Jim Francisco. When I was elected, he said,

“Sheila, I know you've got your Majority Leader's office, but I'll be out November 30th out of the Lieutenant Governor's office, and you can start moving in.” Wow. You just can't imagine who incredible that kind of opportunity was.

So the Lieutenant Governor's office, which was nearby the Transition Office, and watching transitions is another part of working with governors, it was really important to have that Lieutenant Governor's Office just for the transition use. I'll always be very appreciative of him and the cooperation across party lines and the friendships that can result.

And Governor Bill couldn't get into the Governor's Office until after the swearing-in. It was a different way of handling how the transition could work. He just came to the Lieutenant Governor's Office. I was happy to host him.

JW: Did you see any differences between working in the legislature and working within the bureaucracy when you became Secretary of Administration?

SF: I said with the Rules and Regulations Committee, I learned a lot about each agency and each department but sitting at the table on important things—just for example, one of the Secretary of Administration's responsibilities was the Health Care Commission. I still am a direct bill partner of Kansas Health Care Commission. Once again, I was working for myself in the long run. I just didn't know it.

I had no idea behind the scenes how those negotiations needed to go, and who was going to represent the State of Kansas on important things like drug costs and programs for our employees. By the way, of course, personnel are a critical part of the whole state budget and the running of the entire State of Kansas. I've forgotten the question we were talking about, Joan.

JW: We were talking about the working difference between being in the bureaucracy and being in the legislature. You and I both have served in both. The reason I asked the question was that I thought it was a big difference.

SF: Yes, it was.

JW: In how you worked with things.

SF: I didn't serve on the Post Audit Committee, but watched a lot of Post Audit requests come through. The Majority Leader puts things on the agenda, creates the agenda. Some of those seemed to me to be a bit potentially vindictive. When you're on the other side in the Administration Office and the post-audit comes, and you've got to answer a zillion questions, which take a huge amount of staff time. Does the legislature really realize the implication? No.



So that's an example. The other side probably is Finance because even though I was Lieutenant Governor, I still was pretty concerned about the funding for the Department of Administration because that was a responsibility I felt on my shoulders. So you look maybe a little differently at the other side of funding when you've got employees and responsibilities within your agency. I see your head shaking. Perhaps you felt that from time to time also. You bet. It's the other side of legislative in the administrative side.

JW: Let's take a retrospective assessment of where we are now to kind of bring this to a close. As you look back on your time in the legislature, what are you most proud of?

SF: My high standards. My willingness to work with all people, whether they were my friends or whether I could easily communicate with them. That was very, very important, I think, to get anything done, and maintaining responsibility to my personal beliefs representing my constituents. I say "my." Representing the people of the 40th Senate district, and then by the way, I was a Republican, and I had some responsibility there, too, but that wasn't first.

JW: As you look back on the legislature, did you notice—I'm not asking that right—what about changes that you noticed in the legislature during your service? Did it change dramatically in those six years in how it was organized or conducted its work? Does it still work the same way now?

SF: We were fortunate. We had a fairly cohesive caucus. I'm thinking of my final two years. Reflecting back, the oratory of senators was a tradition of the past. I had the privilege of serving with some elderly gentlemen who at the time seemed—gosh, now they're quite young. They thought we'd lost the oratory and the drama and the beauty of the Senate. I heard them. I wasn't an orator, so it wasn't something I was going to contribute to, but each generation notes things that they wished would stay the same.

We were fortunate to have a fairly cohesive caucus, as I said. Seven a.m., if they wouldn't be quiet, I was known to pound my shoe on the table, just once, but nobody ever forgot. There were huge responsibilities, and I said publicly to my Democrat caucus friends, "You all could meet in the telephone booth." Well, we had a good majority on the Republican side. That certainly was to our advantage, but we didn't have brutal, critical defamation of ourselves and each other kind of interactions. The Republican party was still somewhat cohesive.

JW: It was civil, wasn't it?

SF: Yes, it was civil. That's a very good word. That doesn't mean we didn't disagree, and that there weren't times of pounding fists and raised voices. But if we could put together twenty-one votes, then we had a position. And if we couldn't, we didn't have a position. That's sort of the way it was because sometimes we had friends on the other side of the aisle, but not always, and you don't ever know for sure how that kind of process is going to work.

Compared to now, it just wouldn't be near as pleasant to serve. And service doesn't need to be pleasant, but you sure do accomplish more when you can be pleasant. When you can be civil, your word was excellent. I cringe, and I feel saddened when I read—and I go beyond the headlines, by the way. I know the person who writes the article doesn't write the headline—for the State of Kansas. I still follow them quite closely with the opportunity to Martin and Vicky Hawver continue to do their newsletter, and what a service that is to the State of Kansas. Perhaps that should be recorded in your archives also, which I failed in the beginning to say thank you, and I appreciate the opportunity to have had this interview, Representative Joan Wagnon, a colleague from across the aisle, way across the rotunda.

We didn't talk about the difference between the House and Senate. I don't know if that's changed, but sometimes even though I had four legislators whose districts overlapped mine, and I worked closely with them and asked them to go to local meetings and local communities with me, I built that rapport, which was really important. It was beyond Don Crumbaker, my good buddy, but the other three, it just made our constituents understand better.

And so I'm appreciate of your recording some of that. I, too, am glad of the Humanities support of this project, and thank you for the opportunity. I am lucky to have served in the era that I served. I feel blessed by that and glad to have served some really, really important people in the State of Kansas.

JW: I'm going to ask you to close with some advice that you have for other aspirants for public service, whether it's in the legislature or some other form of government service. As someone who has been involved for many years, what advice do you have for people who plan to go into government or legislative service? This is the final question.

SF: Thank you. Certainly young people need the opportunity to think about the fact they will not become wealthy in public service, whether it's elective or appointive or just getting a job, but it was be very rewarding. When someone's telling me they want to run for office, and it's really fun to talk to a potential candidate, whether I'm recruiting them, or whether they're just identifying their interest, a reminder about campaigning and raising money. It's hard to ask your friends for dollars.

For a campaign, Mister or Madam Candidate-to-be, you've got to work really, really hard, and you're going to have opponents, and it's probably going to be a little messy. So be sure to check your closet before you decide you're going to run. If you've got anything dragging along behind you, you'd better think about it very, very carefully, and you'd better be sure your family understands also because you will have scrutiny that you cannot believe. And the campaign is yours. You've got a lot of friends saying, "I'll do this, and I'll do that," but bottom line, you've got to do it yourself. It's on your shoulders. It's your campaign, win or lose. It's you. You'll have lots of people to thank, but you still have to do it when they don't follow through.

If you're going to try for an appointment from a senior governor or senior legislator to be on their staff, go for it. You will have the experience of your life. Again, it's not high, high salary. It's adequate. There's some benefits. Health care's good. We saw to that. There's good health care policy for your health care, and you can take that experience into the other world later if you want to, or you can continue. If you're an attorney, if you're a political science major, if you're a psychology major, if you bring in understanding of how a home works—by the way, you may just be the potential person—so I try to encourage them, but I want them to be realistic. That would be, I'd say. I already mentioned earlier, when the door opens, you've got to notice it open, and you've got to say yes if that's what you can do.

I think we just need more and more incredible people willing to run and help us make Kansas, and I go to the federal level also, individuals to help us be proud as we sit back as retired, former, used-to-be legislators. We still care a lot about what happens, and I encourage those who have an interest to step right up. You'll love it and hate it.

JW: Love it and hate it.

SF: Right.

JW: Senator Frahm, that was a wonderful close to what has been a delightful interview about your background, your accomplishments, the offices that you've held, and the things that you've done. I'm sure that your children and grandchildren delight in hearing some of those stories as well. We will post these interviews, available for people who want to find out more about how government works, and we thank you for your service and for your willingness to share these stories. Thank you so much. I think we're finished. Bye, Sheila.

SF: Thank you.

[End of File]