

INTERVIEW OF GEORGE TEAGARDEN BY JOAN WAGNON, DUANE GOOSSEN, OCTOBER 28, 2022
KANSAS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT, INC.

Joan Wagon: Good afternoon. Today is October 28, 2022, and this is an oral history interview of George Teagarden. George was formerly a member of the Kansas House of Representatives and a director of Animal Health. Did I get that right, George?

George Teagarden: Yes. That is correct.

JW: And he was in the Department of Agriculture.

GT: No.

JW: The Department of Health?

GT: That. Animal Health was a separate agency. Today, it's part of the Animal Health Department, but they changed the law last year and put it all together.

JW: Well, he ran the Animal Health Department, and that made a whole lot of sense because you ran a whole lot of cow/calf operations, didn't you?

GT: I had some experience, yes.

JW: A little bit, yes. We're conducting this interview under the sponsorship of the Kansas Oral History Project. It is a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of establishing an archive of oral histories of Kansans who served in policy-making roles. Now, George, you're going to be part of our collection called Statehouse Conversations, and that's where we interview former legislators to try to find insight on how you developed your political and policy skills. And we're also going to explore your administrative experience in running the Animal Health agency.

I'm Joan Wagon, a former legislator and former Secretary of Revenue, and I'll be conducting this interview with my good friend and colleague, Duane Goossen. Duane is also a former legislator. In fact, we all served at the same time. I think George got here two years before you and I did, and you stayed a couple of years after I left. But basically we all served at the same time.

We are privileged to have as our videographer, David Heinemann, also a member of this body. He is a former Speaker Pro Tem in the House. David and Duane and I serve on the board [of directors] for the Kansas Oral History Project, and that's our interest.

Okay, George, let's start, and you tell me a little bit about your background. I know you're a cattleman. You live near LaCygne.

GT: Yes.

JW: So tell me a little bit about who George Teagarden is and what you've done in your life.

GT: My life, I grew up with my folks and the family and the neighbors and everybody. We had our own ways of doing things amongst the different groups and different people. So we got along fine. One thing that was kind of different in my mind at least, in our family and not necessarily everybody, close members of the family, we had about eight people, ten people that had jobs, and they did some work in the county and then across the state.

My father spent a lot of time helping others I guess you would say. One of the things that he did was he was on the School Board there at LaCygne. In those days, I'm talking about a hundred years ago now—

JW: We weren't there.

GT: Right. Every two years when it was time to elect a new board, the three guys that were there last year and the year before and the year before, they were there again. In those days, nobody wanted to be on the board really in LaCygne, at least. And the fellows that worked on it did a good job and got along fine, and we had a pretty good school, but it was due to a lot of work by a few people. Nowadays, there's like nine on the board. I'm not sure that's quite correct, but it's kind of unusual, but our second-oldest son is Chairman of the Board now at Prairie View School, which is a consolidated school, three different schools, and doing fine. Tomorrow, they're going to be in the cross-country race. One of the girls from Prairie View, she's going to be hard to beat.

JW: So they're doing a good job with those kids in Prairie View.

GT: They're doing a good job, yes.

JW: George, what got you into the legislature? Why did you decide you wanted to run? This was 1980.

GT: We became friends of Barkis.

JW: [Marvin Barkis](#).

GT: Marvin, yes. We worked on the place, the farm, the ranch there at Louisburg, and that's where he was from. So we got along good from the start and continued. But he's just a good person, and he convinced me. He talked to me about it, talked about the good things and the bad things, not so well, and so I thought, "Well, I wouldn't mind doing that maybe."

The governor at that time was [John Carlin](#). John Carlin called me, and he was pushing me. I said, "Okay." I think my dad thought, "What are you doing, son?" Anyway, we got along great, and it just worked out fine.

JW: I think everyone was glad you came up there because by the time Duane and I got to the legislature, you had already moved on to the Appropriations Committee, I think.

GT: Yes.

JW: They changed the name from Ways and Means to Appropriations, but I'm not real sure when they did that. But as I was looking at what you did, you were on the Agriculture and Livestock Committee. You were on Commercial and Financial Institutions and Federal and State Affairs when you first got there. But in '83, you went to Ways and Means and got off of Federal and State Affairs. You made your whole career in the legislature working on agency budgets.

GT: Right.

JW: And handling the money. Duane, that's where you and George came into contact with each other.

Duane Goossen: That's right. When you first came to the legislature, had you watched the legislature in session? Had you been into Topeka? Was it mostly hearing about it through Marvin Barkis?

GT: I heard about the day-to-day work of the legislature basically. And I was there two years, the first two years, I needed some more training.

JW: We all felt that way.

DG: Absolutely. We all did.

GT: A lot of people helped me. It was good. And then I got on Ways of Means, Appropriations, for twelve years.

DG: Did you come to the legislature thinking, "I really want to be on Appropriations"? Was that something you figured out after you got here?

GT: That first two years, probably not that much the first year but the second year, I spent some time up there in that room and listened to what was going on. This was getting towards the end of that year.

JW: The end of that first term.

GT: First term, yes. So I got in on some good stuff to listen to. I thought, "What are you doing this for?"

JW: What interested you? Your business, your livelihood is with animals.

GT: Yes.

JW: You were a stockman. Is that how I would describe you?

GT: Yes. That'd be pretty good. I think that the reason I wanted to get involved with the money, that was kind of the key thing, talking about schools, which you're aware of, and a lot of the

other expenditures that we as a legislative group have to make decisions on. How are we going to divide this money up and so forth? It worked out in the end pretty good.

And then the head Democrat in the House put me on the committee. I think that was because I went and listened to them for a year.

DG: When you first got to Ways and Means or Appropriations, that first time you were on it, you were still a pretty new legislator then. Was that your second term?

GT: Yes.

DG: What did you think of the committee? How did it work? You were a Democrat then on a committee that would have been majority Republican.

GT: Sure, yes.

DG: I'm not sure how rural and urban would have split at that time on the committee. But certainly you were in the minority party.

GT: Absolutely.

DG: What do you remember about that in your first years working on the committee?

GT: Well, for the first year, due to the breakdown of Republicans versus Democrats, and this is not absolutely correct, but basically two Republicans and one Democrat on a subcommittee around the room. So that's where we started. When you're in that position, you don't make a lot of noise because somebody will correct you, one way or another. But you learn a lot, and there's a lot to learn about the whole thing, and you would know that.

But we grew. We learned more and more about it. Everybody that's on the committee, if they're paying any attention at all, they're going to start really learning something.

JW: Who was your first chair?

GT: The first chair was [Bill Buntin](#), and he was a good chair. He once in a while told a joke that he probably didn't need. It worked.

JW: He worked hard at that, I think. He was a Topeka legislator. So I got to know him in that regard. [Rochelle Chronister](#) was on there, too, and she speaks very highly of your work on that committee. Apparently you all worked well together.

GT: We did work well together, and I can tell you why we got along. The first two years, I was on one subcommittee. The second two years, I was on a second one, and then after that, I was always on her subcommittee. So we got well acquainted and discussed issues here and there, wherever we were at. She and I talked about it.

JW: So what budgets were you working, do you remember?

GT: No. At that point, we probably didn't get into any school stuff at that time. We grew in that, I guess you'd say. That's not a good way to discuss it. That's kind of the way that we went at it, both of us.

DG: Do you remember it being very partisan in the committee at that time? Were there a lot of votes where it was Republicans one way and Democrats another? Was it more of the committee just kind of worked things out?

GT: I would say in those days, the committee worked together, not 100 percent, but they all got along, and that's important in something like that. They did well. I think if you go on for years after that, you're going to see the whole thing start to shift. And it has shifted over the fourteen years I was there.

My explanation of what went on, not what went on, but what the results were, 80 percent, this is when I first went into the legislature, 80 percent I considered good people. They worked together, helped each other, so on and so forth, to some degree.

DG: No matter which party.

GT: Right. And as we grew and grew, I guess you could say that. I'm not sure that's a very good way to explain it. Towards the end of my fourteen years there, it was 20 percent that I considered good people and 85 percent that weren't what I would call good people in that position. It just, you know, up and down changed. I think if you'd do any research and study some of the issues of the bills that are put in place and so forth, you can tell who did it almost, just by looking at it. You didn't have to worry because it's either yes or no. A lot of times it was absolutely controlled by the vote, period. It could be pretty stiff.

I think that's something that in my opinion that we sure need to change in the State of Kansas is get some cooperation between the Republicans and the Democrats and work together and make a better government for the State of Kansas by working together. If they don't work together, then you've got a one-sided deal over here, and there's a certain number of people that agree to that, and that's what you see today, only it's the very conservative type people. In my opinion, it really hurts the whole issue of working together.

JW: And surely no one would have called you and/or Rochelle wild-eyed liberals.

GT: No.

JW: You would have thought of yourself, I suspect, as being somewhat conservative or perhaps moderate.

GT: Yes.

JW: But this conservative group that's being elected now has changed the way that the legislature operates.

GT: I would agree with that 100 percent, absolutely.

JW: So, provisos. Duane, provisos were used a little bit when you went on to that committee? They tended to be, by the time I was watching and left the Department of Revenue, they were inserting provisos in almost everything to try to make legislation through the budget.

DG: Yes.

JW: Could you talk about that for a couple of minutes, and George, maybe you could chime in?

DG: The budget is supposed to be about the budget and about spending, but provisos would get inserted, saying so much money will be spent on something or another provided that that department does such and such and such. That got to be more and more and more, and I'm sure that probably fits with your memory as well.

GT: I wasn't really aware of that, but I can imagine after what you've just said. You knew what was happening. That's good.

DG: You rose through your time on the Ways and Means Appropriations Committee, you rose up eventually to be the chair of the committee during the two-year cycle or session that Democrat were in the majority of the House.

GT: Yes, '91 and '92.

DG: That was kind of a banner year because school finance was big.

GT: Big.

DG: During that period. Was Rochelle Chronister your ranking minority member during that time? I'm thinking she was.

JW: Because Bunten was already in the Senate by then?¹

DG: I think that's right. But what I'm interested in is when you were Chair, how did you communicate with the Republicans on the committee? Was there a lot of information sharing? How did it seem to work to you?

GT: I thought we were sharing pretty well across the committee, getting along good. I mean, you would know. I didn't know that we had any problems really on the committee. I mean, here's what we've got to do and what we need to do, and we can get it done, but it's changed. And it was changing at that time.

¹ Bill Bunten served in the House of Representatives from 1963 until 1990. He returned to the state Senate in 2003-2004 to fill an unexpired term before becoming Mayor of Topeka 2005-2013.

DG: It was changing, yes, sure.

JW: You also were on the Agriculture Committee.

GT: Yes.

JW: What kind of agricultural issues were you handling in your term of service?

GT: We had a few issues, but not a lot really at that time. We had a bill introduced into that committee, the Agriculture Committee, that said basically if you can't get \$2.50 dollars a bushel for your wheat, don't sell it. You can't sell it to anybody. You can't see it across the state lines.

I objected because if you couldn't sell it, what do you do with your wheat? In our area, we're on the Missouri line. It put them out of business. It would. Well, that bill did not pass. It didn't pass the committee actually. There were two fellows there that were on each side of me. They disagreed with me, but that didn't bother me too much. They claimed I voted two different ways. That was the way it was going. But we voted no anyway.

JW: Agriculture was changing quite a bit during that time. Water was a big issue.

GT: Water, again, too. We were having that problem with the no rain in the state really. We had several fires, big fires, that have taken a lot of ground away from the people for a year at least and so forth. There's been some changes. And there's some big operations in the state that weren't there thirty years ago. There was a few larger ones, but now there's quite a few large ones in my opinion that I see. We have a few around my area of pretty good size.

JW: And what does that do to the small farmer?

GT: Actually, I don't think that it really hurts them. I mean, you've got numbers, and you get into like cattle. Well, this person's got 100 cows, and this person's 300. Well, you know, there's a little jealousy, I think, but they still operate their own position or their own ranch the way they want to and the way they always have and probably the way their family grew up doing the same type of thing. I think it's working all right.

One thing that we have trouble in our area plus I think the whole state, maybe more than the whole state, in our area, if you've got a farm to sell, a few years ago, it would have been worth a couple of hundred dollars an acre. They sold that place for \$4,200 an acre, and it was people hunting, hunting deer and probably turkey. What can a farmer do? He can't spend that kind of money to make it work.

JW: So the prices of ground, the prices of land way-exceed the ability of a small farmer to purchase land?

GT: Yes, I would agree to that. There's no way you can make \$4,200 on a wheat field.

JW: What about property taxes? Didn't you get some relief by doing use-value on your property taxes on agricultural land? That should have kept those prices down.

GT: It didn't though.

JW: It didn't.

GT: No.

JW: George, from your vantage point as you look back on the years that you served up here and the things you were able to do, I've got two questions for you. What are you most proud of that you got accomplished in the legislature? And second, what is it that if you had advice for a new legislator, would you tell them they need to be focusing on? So, first, looking back on your fourteen years, what are you most proud of?

GT: I'm going to tell you a story that you probably haven't heard anywhere else. When I first agreed to try to get in the legislature and the opponent that I had was from Garnett, thirty miles west of us, and that person who had been in either twenty-two or twenty-four, and I'm confused which was. He had been here for a very long time.

I was there to essentially do a good job. What I wanted to do was win. I didn't oppose Jim Cubitt at this point and so forth, and I actually gave a group that shared their money, some with him, and some of my money went to my opponent. But that's okay. I didn't care. And I don't think he objected. I never heard anything of that degree. We'll just take it like it comes and find out who's #1 and who's #2.

Anyway, at a debate, before the election was held, it was going pretty good, talking and so forth, and one person asked me about this, "Why are you giving him money?" and I said, "I'm voting for a job. I'm not voting against Mr. Cubitt. We'll go from there." And we stuck in there, and I did win, but Mr. Cubitt sent me a thank you with the money that we donated into the pot essentially, and we got along good. Good people. In some cases, there'd be a fight with that kind of a situation. We didn't have a fight.

JW: And you beat him.

GT: I won by about 63 percent.

JW: That's pretty good, George.

GT: Yes, it was. I was pretty pleased. That first night, I went up to the—

JW: Did you come up here to the Capitol, to the Election Office, or was this down in LaCygne?

GT: This was at Mound City, Kansas. That's where they were counting them. Loretta [Teagarden] and I went there three times, and the first time, Garnett was in that first one, and they were kind of heavy for him which is fine, as long as he didn't get too much! Then we went

back again later on, and we were doing a little better. When we went back the third time, we were going to win by that time.

JW: Did you ever have any close races?

GT: No. I was lucky.

JW: And you never lost.

GT: I never lost.

DG: And the two of you who ran against each other the first time, did he ever run again against you?

GT: No. He did not. After twenty-two or twenty-four years, he was probably getting tired, really. A nice man, a nice family. We just got along.

DG: And then you stayed in the legislature for fourteen years.

GT: Fourteen years.

DG: Talk a little bit about what you did after the legislature.

GT: After the legislature, I went to work for the Animal Health Department. At that time, the Animal Health Department was controlled by the Animal Health Board. The Animal Health Board was appointed by the industry. So the governor didn't have a vote in it. The governor had some interest in the amount of money they got.

JW: And that was Bill Graves. Governor Graves.

GT: Yes. But we got along fine there. We had really a good staff there. We had thirty-two positions. Most of the time, there were two of them that were vacant and would change a little bit now and then.

DG: Did you miss the legislature once you left and moved on to Animal Health?

GT: For about a year, I thought, "I've got a lot of friends over there. I ought to go see them." And generally I didn't because I had things to do. I thought of them. I missed them.

DG: It's really different being an administrator of an agency and being in the legislature. They're pretty different deals.

JW: How long did you stay in that agency?

GT: Sixteen years.

JW: Longer than you were in the legislature.

GT: Yes.

JW: So you graduated from K State in 1966.

GT: Correct.

JW: Joined the [Marine Corp] Reserves in April of that year.

GT: Yes.

JW: And then went back to LaCygne and worked on your ranch?

GT: Started that, yes. Then we went to four different ranches to basically get a little more education about how to operate different size ranches and so forth and different species and got along really good. Some of them, we didn't stay too long because it didn't work for us. Some of the others, the last one was five-and-a-half years for us.

JW: So you were working on somebody else's ranch?

GT: Yes.

JW: Okay, yes. Well, George, this has been fun getting to look back on some of the stuff. I'm sorry we didn't have Marvin Barkis here. He could have told us a bunch of jokes.

GT: He would have. You're right. You know him.

JW: I know him well. He loved to tell a good joke or sometimes not a good joke.

GT: He's a good friend now.

JW: And you're still down there in that corner where he lives.

GT: This place where we were at at that time had a nice barn and a nice second level, and we had four dances there over four years. Each year we had one dance. We'd invite some people, and they'd invite some more people. Pretty soon, we had a crowd. Anyway, he was one of them.

JW: I didn't realize that it was Marvin who got you started on this.

GT: Yes, he did.

JW: I think the State of Kansas is better off for having had you there and serving. I'm pretty sure that during those sixteen years that you were in Animal Health, our animals were in better shape. And your son now is in the KLA, right?

GT: Yes.

JW: Is he a Democrat?

GT: I think he is.

JW: Interesting to know. George, thank you.

GT: You bet.

JW: You're done.

GT: Thank you.

DG: And thank you for all the years of service, legislative and animal health. You've given a great deal to the state.

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