

INTERVIEW OF GEORGE WINGERT BY DAVE WEBB, OCTOBER 28, 2022  
KANSAS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT ,INC.

Dave Webb: Good day, ladies and gentlemen. We're certainly glad to be here at the House Chamber today. This is part of the Kansas Oral History Project, and it's in part funded by a grant by the Kansas Humanities Council, and the purpose of it is to interview legislators who served from the sixties through the 2000s to find out how government worked then, and hopefully students and young political people in the future will look back on some of these someday.

Our videographer today is Dave Heinemann who also served in this Chamber as well as I did. I had the honor of serving with him. Today we are interviewing a legend of the area. His name is George Wingert from Franklin County, Kansas. Ottawa is his home. And, George, it's good to see you today.

George Wingert: Good to be here.

DW: When you walked in the door, did you remember—

GW: Oh, lots of old memories.

DW: Lots of great memories. That's absolutely wonderful. You served most of the seventies, correct?

GW: '71 to '78.

DW: '71 to '78. Well, we're going to circle back around to that in a minute, but I'd like to find a little bit about a young George Wingert, if you can remember about him. Tell me kind of where you were raised and went to school.

GW: I was raised on a farm just outside of Wellsville, which is the northeast corner of Franklin County. We were actually over in Miami County. On the farm, my folks were active in the community. Dad was on the School Board. Mom was very active in Farm Bureau work. As a youngster, one of the interesting experiences we had, the legislature passed the deal that they were going to consolidate the rural grade schools. Dad was one of three in Miami County that went around the county and met with all the school boards.

You don't think that was an interesting time. My father was the type that was very even. I never heard him swear. He was about as even as they go. He was a good one to handle that, and he'd tell the people, "Now, we've got a two-year project here. You can decide how you want to do it, or we'll decide for you." And they'd all accept that.

DW: Great.

GW: Now my mother was another type. She liked a good argument and a good fight. She was raised on a farm down in Lebo. Her father died when she was young. So she was raised by a mother who raised seven kids. [Two very different types.]

DW: Wow.

GW: She went to high school on a basketball scholarship.

DW: At Lebo?

GW: No, at Burlington, she and her sister went down to Burlington. [She and her sister were recruited by] the coach down there [who was big in] girls basketball in the teens, and so she went down there, and they outlawed girls basketball. So she took a year at Emporia State and [then] started teaching. She couldn't coach girls, so she coached boys. So that background, and when she came to Wellsville, is why, she coached the boys. So we grew up with all these men talking about my mother being their coach. That was always in the background. And Mother took no prisoners. She was tough as a boot on them.

DW: And probably you, too, wasn't she?

GW: Yes, she gave us no quarter.

DW: Well, that's good.

GW: No quarter.

DW: So you went to school at probably a one-room schoolhouse in that era.

GW: Yes. [There were about 10-12 total students a year.] It burned down when I was in first grade, and they built it back. But then that was an experience, too. We went down and met in the front room of a farmhouse for four months.

DW: Great. So Franklin County is really kind of home.

GW: That was home.

DW: For your family.

GW: Right.

DW: Your folks probably did the normal farm things—cattle, pigs, chickens?

GW: Yes, we had them all. Cattle, hogs, sheep, chickens.

DW: That's what everybody did in that era.

GW: That's right. That's right. We butchered and shared with the family. On both sides of the family, they were widowed young. The aunts were widowed young. So we supplied—we didn't have any money, but we could butcher hogs and cattle and take that and the garden. So that was part of the growing up experience, too.

DW: In that era, nobody did.

GW: That's right.

DW: It was very typical. That's just what you did.

GW: Yes.

DW: So obviously you got your education through high school.

GW: Right.

DW: Then you chose K- State.

GW: K-State, right. My whole family is K- Staters.

DW: I thought you just kind of circled around Lawrence.

GW: That's right. Well, oh, no, we always went through Overbrook. We'd never go through Lawrence. That would ruin your reputation.

DW: It's interesting you say that. It's been eight or ten years that I've taken the family flying. We were heading up to Manhattan. Anyway, the husband said, "Can you kind of veer way north maybe up by Holton so I don't have to look at Lawrence?" They must breed that into you while you're there.

GW: That's right. But what's interesting. Three in my immediate family married KU-ites. We always said those KU-ites needed saving. They need help.

DW: Well that rivalry has been there forever, and it's a great rivalry.

GW: That's right.

DW: It's good for the State. After college, you obviously got married and your family was kind of big in the Polled Hereford business as I remember.

GW: Well, after college, we went to the Army in my era. We went for three years in the Army with the Veterinary Corps, meat inspection. I spent two years in New York City, which was kind of an education to a country kid.

DW: That was a big change from Wellsville.

GW: Right. But the nice part about it, I was up there when they were really nice to soldiers. They had the USO. We didn't have any money. I got paid \$268 a month in New York City. That doesn't go very far, even back then. But the USO had all these tickets. You'd go to Broadway plays, see the Yankees and the Giants play. I never went out to Brooklyn to see the Dodgers, but I had a lady who soon was going to be my aunt, she was a baseball fan. So she'd take me on

Ladies Day because they could always take someone free. I was good at looking for things that were free.

DW: That probably came from your parents' upbringing.

GW: That's right.

DW: And we want to thank you for your service in the Army and your service to your country. That's very important for the democracy and the country that we have today, the freedoms we have.

So you're out of the Service. You come back to Franklin County.

GW: No, actually they had this program that they released you ninety days early if you wanted to go back to college. So I thought I could get out the 15th of February and make it to K State, use that semester to interview for a job. So I went back for a semester at K State and interviewed. I took a couple of courses and spent my time interviewing.

DW: Well, neat! So what job were you interviewing for?

GW: I wound up being a Cities Service Ag Representative, Cities Service Oil Company Ag Representative. I traveled the state of Kansas and the western edge of Missouri.

DW: So that was your first real job.

GW: That was the first job I got paid at.

DW: That's great. How long were you with Cities Service?

GW: Let's see. Three years.

DW: And then decided to do?

GW: A John Deere dealer at El Dorado for three years and worked for Hesston Corporation, too, part of that time, and then went to Ottawa in the gasoline business with Cities Service.

DW: I used to have a John Deere dealership, too. We might have a story or two, but we won't bore the people with that today.

GW: That's right. That was the good old days. I was there when we went from two cylinder to four and six.

DW: For the new generation era.

GW: That was not a pleasant time. It was a profitable time, but not a pleasant time.

DW: Everybody wanted to know how you could get that tractor to stop without pulling the clutch.

GW: That's right.

DW: So you were in the petroleum business. Obviously, Cities Service gave you a kind of a background in the petroleum business.

GW: Right.

DW: I know that you were in the petroleum business for a number of years.

GW: Yes. So we were there for about twenty years, I guess.

DW: And service stations, kind of everywhere?

GW: Service stations and convenience stores. We were in the right time and the wrong time. We went through the shortages of the seventies, but Gulf Oil was one of our main suppliers, and they had oil in Kuwait, and they brought it into the Philadelphia refinery and refined it, and you could trade it for gasoline all over everywhere. While it was a pain in the neck to meet all the regulations, it was a good time financially to be in the business.

DW: That's great. So you transitioned to the legislature, and your seat was from Franklin County. Bob Anderson served in that seat; I remember. A great line of the Chamber here and very knowledgeable in oil and gas. Wayne Angell served there, and then there was another person, and then you came in.

GW: Right.

DW: What motivated you to run for the legislature?

GW: Well, my uncle had been a state senator back in '48 to '52. That was when Farm Bureau and the Extension were separate. We were up there a lot then. So I kind of knew a little about it, but you know, not enough to really know more.

DW: That whetted the hook.

GW: Yes. That was always one of those things. On my mother's side of the family, they were always very active in the Democrat party. When I came to Franklin County, I wound up County Chairman after the first year. It was one of those things. The first year, no one else would run. So I ran and got beat bad.

And then the second time, the next time around, I was ready. My wife said, "If we're going to run, we're going to win." She organized the thing and laid out the map on the dining room table, and she and the kids went door to door all day long, and I worked. Then at night, we'd go. And that's how we won the seat.

DW: Campaigns, to me, are the funnest part of the whole process.

GW: Oh, that was it. And our kids, I think it helped them develop because they got to go out and meet all of these people.

DW: My kids have a little different version of that than maybe I did. I enjoyed it. They would say, "Do we have to do this again?" And I'm sure your kids probably never said that.

GW: No, they didn't. Two of them showed up here this morning.

DW: So you were elected in 1970. The first year was '71.

GW: Right.

DW: Tell me what you thought coming into this Chamber.

GW: I'll tell you what. I didn't know what to expect. You talk about someone who was as green as grass. I knew absolutely nothing. The only thing that kind of saved the bacon, after the election, Bob Anderson had helped my opponent so much, I knew he was going to be up here. I thought, "Well, the important thing for me to do is go see how he reacts."

The next morning, I went down to his office and walked in, and the girls down there were all—they didn't know what to expect. So I told them I want to see Bob. They said, "Well"—anyway, they wrote it on a piece of paper and took it in. I could see Bob in an office with some people. He wrote back and said, "Put him in the library and I'll be in."

So Bob came in and Bob said, "You know I worked for your opponent." "I'm well aware of that." I said, "You're going to be in Topeka, and I'm going to be up there, and we both ought to be for Franklin County." I said, "Can you help me? What do you recommend I do?" and so forth and so on. He said, "Well, I'll work with you, George." He said, "I can't believe you won." He said, "I'm going to demand a recount." He kind of smiled when he said that, but he said, "You ought to go down and talk to this guy in Yates Center, Clyde Hill. He's the dean and former Speaker and Chairman of Ways and Means, "And if you want any money, you've got to go through him. It would just be good for you to travel."

So a couple of days, I went down and saw Clyde. He was in a bank meeting, and his secretary said, "He doesn't have time for you today." I said, "Well, I was just coming through." Actually, I've driven fifty miles out on the road." She said, "I'll call over and see." So she called over, and she said, "He said he'll be here in fifteen minutes if you'll wait."

So I waited, and we spent two hours. He talked the whole time, and he thought I was a Republican. He didn't ask me, and I didn't tell him. I didn't think about it.

DW: In that era, you didn't. You talked about Bob Anderson and being Republican and going to meet him and visit with him. In that era, while you may have opposed each other, you would still work to get along for the best of the areas.

GW: That's right.

DW: And I think you shared another interesting story, if I remember, that yourself, Bob Anderson, Wayne Angell were all in the same Sunday school class.

GW: That's right. If you don't think that wasn't a high-powered Sunday school . . . all the rest of them were very opinionated, and I wasn't. I was very flexible. They were all very opinionated.

DW: Yes.

GW: Jim Allen was in there, too, part of the time.

DW: And Jim Allen succeeded you.

GW: Yes.

DW: When you retired. And that would have been at the Baptist Church. Was that correct?

GW: Yes. We were all Baptists.

DW: That's on the southeast corner of the courthouse?

GW: Yes.

DW: A beautiful building.

GW: It is.

DW: Like lots of buildings, like the stone, if they could talk, there's probably lots of stories there.

GW: That's true.

DW: Well, tell me about your time in the legislature, maybe some committees that you served on that were better than others, some legislative accomplishments.

GW: It was one of those interesting things. A lot of things happen in the legislature. It's not by your design or work. You happen by happenstance to be at the right place at the right time, some good and some bad. [laughs] So you might as well learn to accept that pretty quick.

The first vote we had was a vote on the committee chairman. And the young Turks, and my friend Dave here was one of them, were wanting to change it and make it committal so that the old chairman couldn't run things because at that time, a lot of those chairmen had been here ten, fifteen, twenty years, and they'd had the same committee, and it was a thing.

Anyway, we had a big debate on the floor and so forth. I sat there and listened. It was the first time I'd done anything like that. I liked the idea of a chairman running things. I didn't like things just willy nilly and have to meet to decide what to do. I voted. I sat by Ambrose Dempsey who was the dean—

DW: From Leavenworth County.

GW: And one of the great Americans.

DW: Yes.

GW: Anyway, when they closed the roll, he said, "You must know something that the rest of us don't know." I said, "Oh," and that's all they ever said. About fifteen minutes later, Pete Loux came back, and he read me the riot act. There wasn't any doubt about how he felt about it. I explained to him. I said, "Now, Pete, let me explain one important thing to you. There's 608 Democrats in Franklin County and 2,500 Republicans. The chance of me being re-elected are nil and none. So don't get too excited about this." I said, "If you want me to vote on something, you come tell me ahead of time, and if I agree with you, I will. If I won't, I won't." And that's kind of the way I came up here.

DW: That's awesome. Do you remember any of the committees you served on?

GW: I was on Roads and Highways, the Governmental Organization Committee my first term, and then the second term, I was on Ways and Means, and two or three other committees. Ways and Means was the main one the next six years because you wound up on subcommittees, and you were all chasing down somebody somewhere doing—and through that, we issued a 280 million dollar bond issue for the Med Center, which was very controversial. The interesting part about that was Dr. Spears was from Wyandotte County. He was very opposed to it because if they built a new hospital, he was afraid it was going to close all the other hospitals, and all of my wife's friends—she was from Wyandotte County, and she knew all the people. Her dad had been on the board of the hospital board down there. They were all opposed to it because they were changing—but all the doctors in Ottawa and everybody west wanted a new hospital to train doctors for rural Kansas. So it was a no-brainer for me. I could stand the heat for that, doing that. Anyway, we spent that one year voting the bonds, and then the next two years trying to get the hospital built.

So we spent a lot of time down there, and we had good cooperation, I think, most of the time. I say most of the time, maybe all the time, a very good Chairman on Ways and Means that understood the importance of that aspect of things.

DW: And I think you saw in that era there was what we just said, training physicians for rural Kansas.

GW: Right.

DW: Still a problem today as veterinarians for real Kansas or attorneys for real Kansas or teachers for real Kansas, and how the legislative process needs to step up on that. But it was a problem in that era, too. You said the bond issue was 280 million, which seemed like an enormous amount of money, and that probably would build the parking garage today.

GW: I tell you, that was all the money in the world. You ought to hear people talking about it. I didn't even know what 280 million was. I was borrowing a lot personally, but it wasn't even a drop in the bucket. There wasn't any of us who would do that. But the people who put it together were about right on the money. I think as I might recall, we might have even come in under maybe two or three million, five million under budget.

DW: On time and under budget. What an unheard of thing!

GW: That's right. One of the interesting facets of it, we finally buckled. I don't know whether you know anything about for birthing. We didn't have anything in there for birthing. So you couldn't have any babies in the hospital because they wanted all the babies in the other hospital.

Then it became obvious that these doctors were going out and practicing in the rural areas, they were sending them over to hospitals once in a while. Then they finally decided they really need to put a program in for birthing. So about ten years later, they put a birthing in, and then about five years later after that, they put in a neonatal unit for babies that came in at three and four pounds. I don't know how to explain it right. [*labor and delivery rooms*]

DW: You're right on track. Those same situations happened in rural America that happened in urban America, and you need to have people trained for all of those items.

GW: That's right. And one of the other things that we add to, one of the controversial deals was feed lots in western Kansas were just developing, and they wanted to outlaw the labor so that they couldn't strike. So, anyway, we voted on that, and it was about four or five freshman Democrats, about my second year I think, voted for that, Senate Bill 280. Then Governor Docking vetoed it. Anyway, then the Farm Bureau and KLA [Kansas Livestock Association] got together to override the veto. That separated the men from the boys.

DW: In a hurry.

GW: In a hurry, which was interesting. The old-line Democrats all stuck with the veto, but there was a bunch of us freshmen Democrats that, you know, we weren't seasoned yet, and the labor—I liked labor and all, but that wasn't a big issue for me. And we took—I think it was John Carlin and Fred Weaver and I don't know if there was anybody else in that group that voted to override the veto.

DW: Right. You mentioned John Carlin. He became Speaker of the House and then was elected Governor after that.

GW: Yes.

DW: And Fred Weaver, he was from southeast Kansas. He became a minority leader, and so you came through with some of those great people. And you mentioned Ambrose Dempsey earlier who, as you said, was one of those true great Americans.

GW: Yes, he was. He was.

DW: I always remember his fervent respect and need for the prison that we have.

GW: Oh, that's right.

DW: He was just a great spokesman for that. I always remember he was just devastated when they slowly started taking away the farm at the prison.

GW: Oh, he was. That was one of those interesting things. Ross Doyen, you remember Ross?

DW: Oh, yes, a close friend.

GW: Ross wanted to do away with the farm, he and [Wint] Winter. Winter was my senator, and he was a character. Anyway, they decided they'd take me up to the farm and show me why they ought to do away with it. So we went up there one night. I went up there, and they went around the farm, and they told me all the inefficiency it was and everything. I looked at it and I said, "Well, Ross, you're a farmer. You ought to know that's kind of normal. Wint here is a city slick. He doesn't know." Of course, Wint had these ranches and all and presented himself as being a cowboy.

Anyway, then we went in and had dinner with the warden, and that was an experience, too, because the warden at that time was—I can't remember what his name was, but anyway, he was a character. Ross or someone said something about something. He said, "What? I don't worry about that. Sam, what did you get here for?" "Well, I killed my wife." He was there waiting tables. He said, "What are you here for?" He said, "Well, I killed my partner. He was stealing from me, and I couldn't get anybody to do anything about it. So I just shot him."

So the three guys that were in there were all in there for murder, and he said, "Those are the guys to have here. They're here for a long time, and you know they're going to be here, and it's a good duty." He said, "We just have them come over and do this, waiting tables."

Man, that was far from anything I'd ever been to, but I came back. I told Ambrose. I said, "I'll keep that farm open for a year or two." So all the time I was in the legislature, I fought Ross and Wint on the farm.

DW: Yes. What's interesting is, the correctional institutions and the mental health institutions that are of that era all had great working farms. Osawatomie had about 900 acres and greenhouses and lots of work there for the people there.

GW: All of them had top Holstein herds.

DW: Yes.

GW: And most of those Holstein herds were given the semen from bulls given by Holstein breeders as a contribution just to the cause, which was amazing.

DW: Correct. It was truly a different era of mental health and incarceration at that time. I look back on that, and I remember being there and visiting with some of the inmates, both current and afterwards, and they said, “We learned a trade.” That doesn’t happen today, and that’s unfortunate.

Anyway, enough on that. Ways and Means. I’ve often heard people say that’s a committee that’s like doing your own taxes, but every day.

GW: That’s right!

DW: So tell me about some other great accomplishments or debates you had on Ways and Means.

GW: Higher education was under attack all the time. We were always working with them. We had Archie Dykes from KU. He was the greatest letter writer in the world. You’d get three letters a day from him on different subjects and two phone calls. And he didn’t mind coming down to see you, too. But you always got rewarded for some nice dinner or something at KU. It was one of those things.

It was kind of hard. It never bothered me to say no to Archie because I knew it wasn’t going to offend him. Some of them, once in a while, we had a couple presidents, if you said, “No, we’re not going to do it,” why, they were offended and never came back or a long time. You knew there was a need there if they wouldn’t come back. Archie was never that way. He was a great one to have as a chancellor.

DW: He was a great chancellor, and as you said, he knew how to work with people.

GW: Oh, he did.

DW: That again today is somewhat of a lost art in the political process.

GW: That’s right. One of the things we did as a legislature, we brought the teachers union, the grade school and high school teachers all over Kansas, into the state retirement program. I don’t know if we did it through the Ways and Means or not, but we did it. [[Kansas Public Employees Retirement System – KPERs](#)]

DW: As a legislative [enactment], right.

GW: We brought them in. And also the [welfare](#). That came through the Ways and Means. We brought them in. The State took it away from the County and brought it into the State. So that was one of the things during the time, somewhere in the second or third term that we did.

DW: Right, that's great. So you were here several years, about eight.

GW: Yes.

DW: '70 to '78. What made you decide not to run again?

GW: I had four kids at home. They needed looking after. I thought it was about the right time. There were other things in life to do besides be a legislator, and I enjoyed every day of it, but I thought it was time to come home and look after the kids.

DW: I couldn't agree with you more. That's why I got out. Our kids were growing up. A very, very wise decision.

GW: Yes.

DW: Then another mutual friend of ours, Jim Allen, ran after that, another member of your Sunday school class ran and was elected that year.

GW: Right.

DW: And the Allen family and us because great friends I think because we came in together.

GW: Yes.

DW: And part of our district joined. So we just became great lifelong friends.

Well, you're out of the legislature. There's a new Governor. You're kind of back post-legislative life and get to work with Governor Finney.

GW: Well, [John Carlin](#) first. He was elected that year.

DW: In '78.

GW: He was-- for eight years.

DW: That's correct.

GW: So during that time, I was appointed to the Board of Regents. I spent four years doing that.

DW: So John had appointed you to the Board of Regents at that point in time.

GW: Yes.

DW: Okay. And that's when you talked about your experience with higher education and the chancellor. That gave you a lot of knowledge and database there.

GW: Right.

DW: I think he also appointed Wendell Lady to the Board of Regents.

GW: Right.

DW: So you served with him during that time.

GW: Yes. And [Jordan Haines](#) from Wichita, the banker from Wichita. He was on the Board of Regents, too, at the time. He was another interesting individual. He called up Wint [Winter] and said he heard I was going to be nominated and he said, "We've got to stop that. He's a K-Stater!" And Wint said, "You're going to have a hard time because Carlin's a K-Stater, too." Anyway, it's just one of those little things that happened that you've got to smile about and keep going.

DW: Anything during your tenure on the Board of Regents that was—

GW: Well, we hired a new Executive Director and four or five college presidents during that time, and that was always an experience because every one of them was different.

DW: Right.

GW: You'd interview them, and they'd select them, and then we'd do the final interview, and as a board, we all had different backgrounds. It turned out Jordan Haines and I had a similar background. We hired and fired a lot of people. Some on the Board of Regents had never hired anybody. I'm not being critical. It was nice to have that balance because they'd look at things that I'd never think about. Anyway, hiring the college presidents was probably the most important thing we did at the Board of Regents.

DW: During your time there.

GW: That's right. I think without exception we were lucky. We hired all good ones. The one that I was the most concerned about turned out to be one of the better ones. At Emporia State, we interviewed three guys, and there was one on there who was just super, and all of a sudden, it dawned on me. I said, "Jordan," quietly on the side, I said, "that guy's too good for Emporia State. He's not going to come if we offer him the job." And Jordan said, "I've been thinking the same thing." He said, "You corner him out in the hall and see."

His wife was the daughter of [US Senator] Fulbright from Arkansas. He was a dean at Arkansas University, and he was just interviewing us for practice. He wound up, I think, president of Miami University down in Miami, Florida. And I went out in the hall, I asked him, "If we offer you the job, will you take it?" He looked at me and he said, "That's kind of an interesting question. Why do you ask?" I said, "Well, because my friend Jordan Haines is worried about if we offer it to you, you won't come," and he said, "I really appreciate the opportunity for the interview." He said, "No. Why don't you just select someone else? I'll quietly go home." I said, "Fine."

Then we were left with just one. One other candidate didn't really show up. So we were left with just one, and he had a habit. He had a handshake that was just kind of a wet noodle. But he had a tremendous wife, and all the policies that he'd done in New Mexico had been great. I couldn't figure out how a guy like that would ever work out, but he came to Emporia and did a great job for us.

DW: Great. You're right. After Carlin and [Mike Hayden](#) was Governor, then came Finney. Then you became a liaison for Governor Finney.

GW: Right. I had retired and wasn't doing anything. I just went to a meeting in Emporia one day. I didn't have anything else to do. I had no rhyme nor reason to be out there, and there she was and so on and so on. She said, "What are you doing now?" I don't know who it was, someone said, "He's retired," so forth and so on, and she said, "Well, that's great, George. Why don't you come around afterward?" Then she said, "Why don't you come up tomorrow and talk to me? I've got a project I want you to handle. You'll like it, and it won't take any time."

So I did for three years. I was her representative in the Senate as legislative liaison.

DW: I remember I was in the Senate at that time. You were there.

GW: That was a great experience.

DW: Yes.

GW: And the thing about it was, Buddy Burke was president of the Senate, and he and my wife had lived in the same apartment complex. His wife and her dad and my father-in-law and my mother-in-law were great friends.

On Wednesday up here, we used to have the Brown Bag, and a bunch of us, not a bunch, six or eight, Bible studied. And Buddy was in that. So I knew him from that. Anyway, when I told him I was going to do it, he said, "I don't know whether that's a plus or a minus." But it worked out great.

DW: And you developed those relationships with Bud and others that you developed for a lifetime. By that time, Wint's son was serving in the Senate. Wint, as we said, we had WWI and WWII.

GW: That's right, and they were both characters. Wint Jr. is now on the Board of Regents.

DW: That's correct.

GW: Those things kind of transition along people that you meet and know and so forth and so on.

DW: And then from there, you did a little bit of lobbying.

GW: Yes.

DW: For I think horse racing.

GW: For [Phil Ruffin](#). Actually for dogs. Phil and I had been in the gasoline business together. I'd sold Phil a gazillion gallons of gasoline for all his convenience stores and everything. So we'd been friends since the early seventies. This was in 1990.

So he knew I'd been up there and he called up one day and said, "What are you doing today, George?" I said, "Oh, nothing. I'm just sitting here," whatever I was doing. He said, "Well, I need someone to go to Topeka and try and pass this little [bill] so we can have racing, have slot machines and racing."

I never put a dime or a quarter or a nickel in a slot machine. I don't ever intend to. I spent fifteen years trying to get it passed and the dog tracks. But anyway that was just part of the deal. It was great working for Phil because that opened up a whole different world that I had never been exposed to before.

DW: Right. And when you served on the legislature, you had lobbyists who were friends.

GW: Yes.

DW: So it was kind of a transition to another side of the governmental process.

GW: That's right. Bob Anderson was a friend. [Paul Fleener](#) became one of my close friends for life.

DW: Another one of those good Americans. He was the Public Affairs Director for Farm Bureau for many years.

GW: That's right. You kind of look back on it, on my mother's side of the family, they were always Democrats, and I wound up associated with many Republicans as I did Democrats even though I was a registered Democrat up to this day. I don't ever intend to change. But the Republicans need a lot of looking after, and so I try and look after a lot of them.

DW: Your tenure here, mine, Dave's, and Joan's, we all came from different backgrounds and different party affiliations, you were friends, and you worked together.

GW: That's right.

DW: Just like Ambrose Dempsey and Fred Weaver and some of those names you mentioned here. It is truly a tonic that I wish that the current legislators, both state, not only Kansas, but all the other states and the federal figured those friendships back out.

GW: I was thinking about this when Fred called. My uncles were very active, both of them. One of them was a Democrat, the County Chairman of Coffey County for fifty years and went to

every Democrat National Convention from '28 to '56. The other, he was one of these young whippersnappers that was available. A couple of interesting things happened in his life. He'd been to conventions and all and got acquainted with Harry Hopkins, Roosevelt's main advisor.

Anyway, Harry Hopkins called my uncle down there in Coffey County. He was out plowing in the field as he does. He come in, my grandmother said, "Harry Hopkins wants you to call him. Harry Hopkins called and said Eleanor Roosevelt's come through St. Louis. She wants to see the Forestry Department at Columbia [MO]. Would you go over and meet her in St. Louis and take her to the Forestry Department and bring her back and take her to the Forestry Department in Kansas because we want to put wind breaks in Kansas?" And he said yeah. He said, "Jones has all these free tickets. I can ride the train over there and ride back." And he said, "If you just have her bring just a little money for lunch, you don't need to pay me."

So he gets on the train, rides to St. Louis, meets her, Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of the president of the United States, 1937. She shows up, and she has a handbag and a little duffel, an overnight bag that she's carrying. She gets off the train.

They get on the next train, go to Columbia, go to the [Forestry Department]. They go down, and Uncle Bob said he made the deal with her that they had to stop and have dinner and meet William Allen White who was a good friend. Anyway, they met William Allen White at Emporia and stayed there all night to talk. White was a talker. And Eleanor was not bashful. White sent a car at 7. They were out there at 7. At 2:00 in the morning, he said, "I'd been on the couch and took a nap for two hours and woke and they were still going. I told Eleanor, 'If we don't get back down there to the hotel in time, we won't have time to get up and eat.'"

So, anyway, they got up and they went on to Pratt out there. Here's what's interesting. About forty or fifty years later, I ran into this doctor, what's his name, senior moment, from Manhattan and I were talking about it. He was telling me, I was sitting over at a window. He was a senator. He said, "My dad was the proudest appointment in his field. He was State Forester and all. It was in Pratt, Kansas in 1936 when Eleanor Roosevelt came through."

DW: Interesting.

GW: He said, "He was the only one, and she had some kid running around, looking after her." I said, "That kid was my uncle." Anyway, I looked it up, and Uncle Bob wrote this book here. One of the deals in it, he didn't get because he couldn't find it. They finally found it. He got a picture of Eleanor Roosevelt and I forget now what his name is from Manhattan that was State Forester that day.

DW: How those things come about.

GW: Come about by accident. In those days, people worked back and forth together, and life was so simple. Eleanor Roosevelt, at the same time he was telling me this, [Hillary] Clinton was going to China, and she took 2 47 planes full of people, press and all that and everything. Eleanor Roosevelt went across everything. She'd been through the Badlands where all the people were starving to death. So she called my uncle to go up there and take those people out of that

and move them to Iowa. That's another, just things like that that my uncle did as a kid that kind of motivated most of my family to be somewhat involved in politics.

DW: That's so important. We'll close here in a minute, but as you talked about Eleanor Roosevelt and coming and helping getting the Forestry Department started here. There was another great Kansan, Amelia Earhart.

GW: Yes.

DW: She was invited to a State Dinner in Washington and was sitting next to Mrs. Roosevelt. We all have sat through plenty of dinners with boring speakers. That was the same scenario. Amelia leaned over and said, "Do you want to go flying around the town?" They both slipped out and got in her airplane and flew around Washington, DC, just two of them, and came back. That would not more happen today than a man on the moon.

GW: That's right.

DW: Well, I think this has been a great interview, George. We've talked about your family and how those relationships forged, how you've got involved, and that's still very important today, to be involved in your community. You said you were Democratic Party Chairman of Franklin County and your time in the legislature and the Board of Regents. And it's so great that you have been able to serve our state.

GW: Just one other little thing about it. The thing about it is, I think I've been very fortunate that my wife encouraged my kids who were all involved, went along the time, too, and Harold, my middle son, was Treasurer of the Young Democrats of America. Now you think some farm kid from Kansas to get through all of those hula hoops. That was a great experience.

DW: That's great. As we get ready to close this interview, ladies and gentlemen, we want to thank George for coming up here today for his service, #1 in the Army to your country, for your service to the State of Kansas, and all of the great memories that you've shared with us today. So, George, thank you very much. You have a great day, my friend.

GW: Thank you, my friend. Good to see you again, keep up the good work.

[End of File]