

INTERVIEW OF JACK WEMPE BY ALAN CONROY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2021
KANSAS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Alan Conroy: Good afternoon. The date is September 28, 2021. It's 1:00 PM, and we're in the House Chambers at the Kansas State House in Topeka, Kansas. I'm Alan Conroy, a forty-year-plus state employee with the majority of that state service working in the Kansas Legislative Research Department, a central nonpartisan research and budget staff for the legislature. And I'm currently with the Kansas Public Employees Retirement System. I'm honored and privileged today to be interviewing and really discussing things with former Representative J. R. "Jack" Wempe. My first question has got to be, what does J. R. stand for? I've always wondered that.

J. R. "Jack" Wempe: My father was John, and I'm John, and I have a son John, but as the middle one, they always called me Jack.

AC: And it just stuck with you.

JW: The middle name is Rowland, which is kind of interesting. It was my mother's maiden name.

AC: Well, now I know. But I will always think of you as Jack. Former Representative Wempe served eight years in the legislature. He first served in the 1991 legislature and served the next four terms representing the 113th district, which is composed of Rice County and part of Barton County and part of McPherson County. I've got that right? And I'll be conducting this interview on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing legislators. The interviews will be made accessible to researchers and educators. These interviews are funded in part by a grant from the Humanities Kansas. I also need to thank Mary Galligan and the State Library for their collective assistance to me in doing the research and prep work for the interview today. And the audio and video equipment is being operated by former Speaker Pro Tem David Heinemann.

So former Representative Wempe was born in Frankfort, Kansas, if I've got that correct, but you grew up in the Hutchinson area.

JW: Yes.

AC: You went to high school at St. Teresa's in Hutchinson?

JW: Yes.

AC: And then you attended Rockhurst College, which now may be a university?

JW: Yes.

AC: Now it's Rockhurst University, and you received your degree in education. You also earned a master's in Secondary Administration at the University of Kansas.

JW: Yes.

AC: So you're a Jayhawk?

JW: Yes.

AC: Former Representative Wempe has served as a teacher, as a coach, as an economic development director and a rental property owner and manager. He's served on the Kansas Board of Regents following his legislative service and also the Tech Council .

JW: Tech Authority. [Postsecondary Technical Education Authority – Kansas Board of Regents]

AC: Tech Authority, excuse me. And he even contemplated running for governor in 1998 against Governor Bill Graves. I saw some clips there.

JW: Not very long.

AC: A passing thought. You also ran for the State Board of Education in District #7, and he's married to Vicky and has six children. So the question has to be, do you have any grandchildren?

JW: Yes, we do. We have fourteen grandchildren.

AC: Well, that's great. I read an article that stated when you started teaching that you would have accepted any teaching job that paid a salary.

JW: Yes. I went to college on a shoestring like a lot of people have done. When I graduated, why, any kind of a job looked good. I accepted a job at a very small high school in Miami County. That high school had thirty students. That was the beginning of the teaching career. I did wind up—I moved to Louisburg and went into administration there. I became the principal of the high school there and then later, superintendent out in Central Kansas.

AC: Did I also see in the clips that maybe that first teaching job or one of those early ones, you were the high school basketball coach?

JW: I was. I coached for eight years prior to going into administration. I taught English and Government.

AC: Maybe that first year when you arrived at that high school, their win/loss record was not very good?

JW: Well, it wasn't, and we had some fairly good years during that period of time, but it was a very small school. At that time, the BB class, which was high schools under 60 enrollment, was

the largest class in Kansas. It was interesting. BB basketball was interesting. Communities were very involved in it, and it was fun.

AC: Your first year, again in that article, I saw where your first year of coaching was so so, but in the next three years, the community thought you were the best basketball coach ever because you had a winning season.

JW: When you win, that's the way it is. When you lose, it goes in the other direction. Sometimes that's when you'd done your best coaching job.

AC: I also noticed in that column, too, you said sometimes whether it's coaching or maybe politics, sometimes you just don't want to mess things up. If things are going on, don't mess them up.

JW: That's right.

AC: Do you think that would apply to politics sometimes, too?

JW: Well, probably. Do no harm.

AC: I noticed when you were in the House, you served, of course, on numerous committees—Agriculture, Economic Development, Local Government, Taxation, Subcommittee on Higher Ed, Education, Tourism, and, of course, the Joint Committee on Economic Development. A good cross-section there. But let's first talk a little bit about your background. Tell us a little bit more about your life before you entered the legislature. So as we mentioned, you were born in Frankfort.

JW: Yes.

AC: But then you ended up over by Hutchinson or in Hutchinson.

JW: I was a child of the Depression, obviously at my age, and rural, very rural. Those were pretty tough times for rural people. I was a year and a half old when we moved to Hutchinson. We moved on to a place my grandfather owned down there, my mother's father, and my dad built a house there. So that's where I grew up. I grew up in kind of austere circumstances, rural. That's just the way it was.

AC: Especially in those times.

JW: I went eight years to a one-room school, which you know, there are pros and cons to that, but that's the way it was, Mitchell Elementary for eight years.

AC: How many students, do you remember?

JW: Well, most of the time, it was sixteen or seventeen in that category and eight grades. My class, there were three of us who went all the way through. We had various times where others joined us, but three of us went all the way through which is a little bit unusual, two boys and a girl.

AC: One teacher that taught everything?

JW: One teacher that taught them all.

AC: So she's now a saint.

JW: Well, she is. Those schools, they're very dependent upon the teacher. A one-room school that gets a good teacher, it's a good learning environment. But on the other hand, a poor teacher, it can damage a lot of kids. It is interesting. It's an interesting dynamic. I always thought you sat there in class, and you heard everyone recite, and it was like repeating every year because you kind of heard that before.

AC: Had your family been involved in politics before you ran for the House?

JW: No, had not. We talked about government and those kinds of things. My dad was a reader, and he was interested in that, but none of them had been directly involved in politics except my mother had an uncle who had been a longtime county superintendent, which was an elected position. In a way, that was politics. And I knew him. I worked for him one summer. I really enjoyed visiting with my uncle. So I'd have to say he had some influence. He was very interested in politics and was a precinct committee person and talked politics a lot. So there was some interest I suppose generated then.

AC: If I may ask, Roosevelt Democrats in those days?

JW: Probably, very much. My father, of course, as I mentioned, Depression. He appreciated Roosevelt. Maybe Truman Democrats might be a better definition for my father and myself.

AC: And your personal interest in politics then, did that develop early on or maybe a little later?

JW: I think it did. Of course, I taught government, and I was interested from that point of view. It is interesting though. I came up here after quite a long time doing other things. So I didn't come up here as a young person at all. I was very unaware of what went on in this place. I was just not a—I guess I was not well prepared in some respects to be here.

AC: But you were a good government teacher, I'm sure.

JW: Yes. That's the way it was. We overcame that.

AC: You mentioned your uncle, but were there other mentors in politics or someone you maybe aspired to be like in public service?

JW: I don't know, as I did, I don't know that I had anyone in the immediate area. I really did respect Harry Truman. I enjoyed Truman, and I read his stuff. I liked his style. I liked his understated way of doing things. I guess there may have been some influence there. He, of course, was in office when I grew to maturity, you might say. Obviously I remember the '48 election and those things.

AC: From what I've read, I always thought that Truman, you never had to second-guess on what he thought or where he stood. He was very clear.

JW: He was, and he was kind of understated in the way he approached things.

AC: So it got to be November of 1990, and you decided you were going to run for the legislature.

JW: I did. I had run in a primary four years prior to that and was defeated. But I still was interested in doing it. My predecessor, LeRoy Fry, was retiring. He agreed to support me even though I had run against him, but we burned no bridges in that campaign. LeRoy's wife [Vanora] had taught for me when I was superintendent of schools. She was a home ec [economics] teacher at the Little River High School. I knew them well.

He supported me and I ran. The district had changed. They'd had reapportionment. I ran against an incumbent.

AC: Frank Buehler?

JW: That's right.

AC: I noticed in the '88 election, and of course you're right, maybe some of those districts, there might have been some changes there, and he won at least that seat, and he beat a gentleman by the name of Kent Roth I think by about—Frank Buehler got 3,800 votes. But in the 1990 general election, you received 3,664 votes, and Frank Buehler, 3,375. So you beat him 52 percent to 48 percent, and he actually got less votes than he did two years earlier.

JW: It was a strong campaign. I worked hard in that campaign.

AC: A lot of money?

JW: No, not a lot of money, but I walked the district twice. I even walked during the primary period when I didn't have an opponent to try to become more known. And I was fairly well known anyway. I'd been Economic Development Director in Rice County. Of course, I had quite

a bit of Barton County in that campaign. I was not familiar with that—Ellinwood and Hoisington and some of those areas right against Great Bend.

But I worked hard, and it was a good campaign. It just happened to be a Democrat year, I guess. Only three times have the Democrats controlled this place.

AC: Timing's everything.

JW: And that was one of them.

AC: You didn't have any primary opposition then.

JW: No.

AC: The next three elections, you never had a primary opponent, which I think speaks a lot for you. Then I noticed in '92, a woman by the name of Mary Bolton ran, but you beat her with 52 percent of the vote that time. Then she ran the next time.

JW: Again.

AC: And you beat her again.

JW: It was close.

AC: Fifty-four percent of the vote.

JW: It's interesting. She lost her husband. Her husband had taught for me also, which was interesting. She had been County Clerk there and was well known in the county. Her husband passed away, and she remarried, and they moved in next to us. We were neighbors for a good long time before she passed away, a very nice lady

AC: I'll bet. Then in 1996, it was Doug Keesling.

JW: Which was her son-in-law.

AC: Still kind of in the family.

JW: They still wanted to get me out of there.

AC: But you beat him with 53 percent of the vote. I did notice—I don't think I wrote it down, but the party affiliation in your district, Republican to Democrat to Independent. If I'm remembering correctly, at least one time out of those three, Democrats was the smallest group. It was Republicans, then Independents, and then Democrats.

JW: Yes.

AC: But clearly you did okay.

JW: I was a pretty moderate Democrat. I tried to fit the district and maybe did to some extent.

AC: So you got elected in November of 1990. Of course, Governor [Joan] Finney beat Governor [Mike] Hayden.

JW: Yes.

AC: I think that was certainly property taxes were probably an issue in that election.

JW: A big part of it, yes.

AC: So here you roll into Topeka from Little River, and not only was there a Democrat governor, but the Democrats took control of the House.

JW: Yes.

AC: So you have Marvin Barkis as Speaker. You had Bill Reardon as Speaker Pro Tem. You had Donna Whiteman as Majority Leader, and Robert H. Miller was the Minority Leader. So you came to Topeka, and the chamber here was Democrat. The Democrats had the upper hand.

JW: It was. By one vote.

AC: One vote.

JW: We all had the ability to sink the ship, didn't we?

AC: When I do these, I always like to look back at just some of the names that were in the legislature when you came that very first time. Elizabeth Baker, Gary Blumenthal, Rick Bowden, Betty Jo Charlton, Rochelle Chronister, Darlene Cornfield, Don Crumbaker, Jim Garner, Duane Goossen, Lee Hamm, David Heinemann, Bruce Larkin, Ed McKechnie, Melvin Neufeld, Mike O'Neal, Kerry Patrick, Richard Reinhardt, Kathleen Sebelius, John Solbach, George Teagarden, Susan Wagle, and Joan Wagnon. So you joined really quite an illustrious group of people.

JW: They were a fine group on both sides of the aisle. I thought they were anyway. I had a lot of respect for them. I think Elizabeth Baker just passed away.

AC: I believe she did. I think I did see that. I'm sorry to hear that. So you're in the legislature. You're in the House, sitting at one of these chairs out here in the chamber. One question I also like to ask is do you remember the first time you came to the well of the chamber to speak or to carry a bill?

JW: I really don't. I don't know what it would have been. I do remember I carried the first veto that was overridden in a number of years.

AC: Actually I saw that.

JW: I don't remember that, but I will tell you I came, and of course, I did, like all the freshmen, I tried to sit here and look important and like maybe I belong here and really didn't have much of a clue. At that time, there wasn't a lot of instruction on how to proceed, and that's changed, I think. I think they do a lot better job now of preparing new legislators for the session. But I was, well, maybe green. That's a different connotation now.

AC: Did any of the senior members take you under their wings to help show you the ropes, tell you the ropes?

JW: I don't know about that. I had a lot of respect for Marvin Barkis. I think he was a fine leader and a fine person. I don't know as anyone particularly took me under their wing, but I survived.

AC: So you mentioned Marvin Barkis. And then I think in your terms would have been Robert H. Miller became speaker after.

JW: Yes, and I really liked Bob Miller, too. I think he's a fine person. I've run into him occasionally since being out of office, every once in a while.

AC: And Tom Sawyer would have been the Minority Leader then.

JW: Tom Sawyer was, and I see he is again. He has a lasting quality that I didn't have.

AC: And then I think towards the end of your terms, Tim Shallenburger became Speaker.

JW: Yes, he did.

AC: Sawyer was still the Minority Leader. You mentioned Barkis. Did you ever have much dealings either with Robert H. Miller or with Shallenburger on issues or just interactions?

JW: I knew both of them I think pretty well. I probably discussed things, but I don't know if any specific interaction with them—Marvin Barkis, it was interesting. I didn't know Marvin when I came although I had taught Marvin's sister. Marvin is from Louisburg, where I had been in the school system. For a short time, we rented a house from Marvin's father, and he was off in law school or somewhere at that time. So I really didn't know Marvin, but I got to know him and came to respect him. And I liked Tim and Bob Miller both.

AC: We mentioned just some of the committees you served on—Agriculture, Tax, Economic Development, Education, Tourism. Any of those that were maybe your favorite committee out of all of them?

JW: I think in my lifetime education has played an awfully big part. I've been involved in education from a lot of different perspectives and even wrote a little bit for the family a little memoir kind of thing about that, the education issue. So that was always an important issue for me, and I enjoyed being on those committees.

I had worked then in Economic Development. I was pretty fired up about that kind of thing, too, and was appointed when I came here to represent the Democrats in the House on Kansas, Inc., and I served on that board for five-and-a-half years. Charlie Warren was the head of it, and I enjoyed every minute of it. I was very interested in that.

I became over time, I became very interested in tax policy. I was on the Tax Committee for quite a while. So I became involved in that. And in the later years here, I became pretty involved in higher education. I took quite an interest in that. We had an *ad hoc* committee that worked on that pretty strongly at one point. I served as you mentioned on the Higher Education Committee. I got involved in those issues, particularly the coordination between the different sectors, and that was interesting to me and something I worked on quite a bit.

AC: There was a need for coordination perhaps?

JW: There certainly was. We had made, I don't know, twenty-some efforts to do something about that. I made a couple and failed, and finally it got done with [Senate Bill] 345, the year after I left. Of course, I became a part of that later.

AC: But never on Appropriations or Federal and State Affairs?

JW: Neither one, never was.

AC: Any desire to be on either one?

JW: Of course, Appropriations became so much more important during the time I was there, and it is now. When I was here, the Education Committee and the Tax Committee still dealt with policy, and the Appropriations Committee confined itself pretty much to appropriations. I think maybe that's changed a little bit. But I never was on that committee, no.

AC: I did a count of your bills and resolutions that had your name on it. There were over eighty-eight that I could find during your term. There were resolutions. You did one honoring the Claflin High School football team, 1991, eight-person Division 2 State Championship.

JW: I did, yes. Those are obligatory.

AC: And congratulating the Coronado Quivira Museum on a new exhibit. Then of course, congratulating, and commending Gloria Timmer at that time and memorial resolutions like with Wanda Fuller and Theo Cribbs and Ambrose Dempsey and Don Smith and Ben Foster.

JW: Well, as far as bills, I learned particularly when we were in the minority, I learned that if you're going to accomplish anything, it probably needs to be a committee bill, or you certainly need to get support from the majority party to be with you on a bill. I think, of course, my name would have been on resolutions and things like that. Some of the more important bills I worked on I'm sure don't have my name on them. They were run through committee or something. If your objective was to try and get something done and the reality of being in the minority is that you work differently than you do if you're in the majority.

AC: The ability to work across the aisle?

JW: I think so. I feel like that I did that fairly well. Many times I think I had more support on the Republican side than I did on the Democrat side. There were some major issues that I was a little bit crosswise with my own party and some issues that the majority of the party thought differently than I did. On those kinds of things, I probably found--certainly on qualified admissions--Ralph Tanner was an ally. On the corporate hog issue, the Republicans were supportive of that. Neither one of those would have been supported by a majority of Democrats.

AC: From your observation, would you think that sort of working across the aisle, do you think that's prevalent today?

JW: No, I don't think it's prevalent today. I think it's much different today. That's too bad in my view, but it is what it is. I'm kind of disappointed that they can't work across the aisle better, but I think maybe there's more separation philosophically than there was. When I was here, there were a lot of moderate Republicans that were just as interested in getting things done as I was, and maybe sometimes the Republican view was to do it somewhat differently, but they were still very interested in having things happen. Now as we observe all the time, it's not so much that way.

AC: I noticed your first bill, at least I found with your name on it, was in '91, House Bill 2161, an exemption of certain electric cooperatives from the Corporation Commission regulations.

JW: I don't remember that, but that's probably right.

AC: I don't think it made it all the way through the process.

JW: Probably not. One of the early bills I did get involved in and it almost defeated me was an intangibles bill. I remember that. I ran into a buzzsaw on that although philosophically I might have been right on that, but it wasn't the thing to do.

AC: In fact, that was one of the clippings. During the 1991 interim, you and George Teagarden.

JW: George Teagarden and I.

AC: You were going to propose to the '92 legislature to reinstate the intangibles tax, if I remember correctly, statewide as a matter of fairness.

JW: But we were going to do it much differently than it had been done before. We were going to bring the money here, and we were going to send it out as a reduction of property tax. We thought that was the fairness issue.

AC: In fact, the Chair of the House Taxation Committee in 1992 promised that she was going to have a hearing on that bill that you and Representative Teagarden had proposed. Chairperson Wagnon had promised that you were going to have your hearing on the bill in the 1992 session. I'm sure she made good on that promise.

JW: I'm sure she did. It didn't go anywhere though, did it?

AC: You mentioned it, some of the bills that your name did get on—maximum homestead property tax refund was increased. Parental notification was required before abortion performed on a minor. Workers comp reform, and, of course, community development corporations, business incubators, early childhood, neighborhood improvement, Youth Employment Act, the admissions requirements for state educational institutions, juvenile justice reform, school district finance, local option budgets per pupil, all of that school district finance, at-risk people waiting. Certainly the themes, I think, are agriculture, economic development, education.

JW: Those would have been where the interest was. And of course, that '92 sessions you mentioned was a horrendous session as a lot of people recognized. A lot was accomplished in that session, some really big stuff. I think sentencing guidelines was in that session, and, of course, reapportionment was during that session. It was interesting. They had reapportioned I think in 1990, using as I understood some kind of agricultural census. That was changed. So they reapportioned again in 1992, using the federal census. So my first term here, I was involved in the reapportionment issue, not directly, but I was involved somewhat.

AC: Did your district get—

JW: My county got put back together. Rice County had had the Sterling area cut off in 1990, and I did not represent that area in 1990 in that session, but it got put back together in the '92 reapportionment. Now it's split every which direction.

AC: And maybe more on the horizon.

JW: No one even knows who their representative is any more in our county.

AC: That would be tough. So reapportionment worked in '92, I guess. You got something passed. There have been some, I don't know, maybe more challenging reapportionments in later years. I know you weren't in the legislature then.

JW: I kind of knew what was happening in that because I kind of watched it. It's interesting how they do that with the computers and that sort of thing. So reapportionment is always a big issue, and it was at that time. I think there was some concern with a representative or Congressman Slattery as to where Riley County would be and some of that sort of thing.

AC: It's still with us.

JW: Still with us. That year, we did the sentencing guidelines, and we did the big school finance thing, of course, [that] was the elephant in the room that entire year. That's the one that even though I wasn't on the Education Committee, but because I'd been a superintendent, I had made budgets under the former finance system, and I kind of understood the school finance. In fact, I had made budgets as a superintendent under the two prior financial systems for education in Kansas, and the '73 change, [under] Bob Bennett, was much improved, but it became strained by the time we were dealing with it, and of course, we had the court issue. It had to be changed.

What we did was kind of unique as far as the country was concerned, the way it was approached, but it finally got through after a ten-day veto session.

AC: In fact, in the clippings, and of course, maybe every session, post-session, but the articles were, the question was that 1992 session perhaps the most successful ever in terms of addressing major issues before the State?

JW: There were a lot of them addressed. Another issue that happened that year that I was very much involved with is the enterprise zone thing, and that maybe wasn't certainly equal to these others, but it was quite a change, and I had worked with that as the Economic Development Director. I chaired a subcommittee that summer with [Rep.] Frank Weimer and [Sen.] Dave Kerr and I. We developed a new system on that, and that passed that year, too.

And sentencing guidelines were—in my view, that was a horrendous issue. I sat here two days during that debate as a nonlawyer listening to my lawyer friends separate on that issue. It was difficult for me. I still am not sure that we did the right thing. We also had maybe the first regulation of abortion law pass that year.

AC: Yes.

JW: So that would have been a big issue, too. There was a lot of big stuff done. I remember Workers Comp was a big issue at the time. It came up at the end of the session. We just didn't have time to address it. So it had to wait until the next session.

AC: When you think about that, school finance, property tax relief, classification of properties, sentence reform, abortion, all that.

JW: It was a big year.

AC: Yes. You had mentioned that 1991 session and the gubernatorial override of Governor Finney. In the clippings it said that in fact there were three of her appropriation bills—she had vetoed three items of appropriation, the legislature of the House overrode her, and that was, as you indicated, the first time and the last time was Governor [Robert] Bennett in 1976. It had been quite a while since that happened. But you made the motion on the House floor to override one of them, and that was a transfer of 1.3 million dollars from the state Water Plan Fund to the Department of Wildlife and Parks, and a million of that was going to be to renovate Cheyenne Bottoms wetland.

JW: That's right. They had started the program out there of trying to regulate better the water in Cheyenne Bottoms, and this was the measure that would allow that effort to continue. That was in my district. So that's why I carried the proposal to override.

AC: The vote was 107:17. So you must have been persuasive.

JW: Very persuasive. It was probably an easy one.

AC: In fact, not that you should spend too much time quoting clips from a number of years ago, but after that vote, you said, you compared the negotiations over the transfer of that water plan fund money for Cheyenne Bottoms with your wife over buying a new refrigerator.

JW: I remember that, the refrigerator speech.

AC: You said you spent the amount of money you wanted, but she got to choose the brand name that she wanted.

JW: I was trying to soften things a little bit with the governor.

AC: How did our governor at the time think about you leading the charge to override one of her vetos?

JW: I don't know. She never said anything. I don't know if it bothered her much. She invited us to go out on her boat once, so I guess—

AC: And she brought you back?

JW: And she brought us back.

AC: That's good. Some of the other issues, the '92 session, the local school districts to help pay for building construction projects.

JW: You know, I opposed that bill. You probably picked that up.

AC: I did see that.

JW: That was a reaction to the other one. The other one passed, and there were people very upset because it did, of course. This came after that, the proposal. The thing I objected to was that there was no filter. There was no ability for the state to be involved in this decision. It seemed to me like we were giving every local school district access to the State General Fund, and I think we did. I think that's been changed somewhat now.

AC: It has. I believe so.

JW: So that's good.

AC: In that quote in that article, it talked about you were concerned about that very point of no caps on the access to the program.

JW: I thought there would be facilities built that should not be built and districts that should not have a new facility. You know, you lose some and you win some.

AC: Another one I saw was in '93. There was a bill about living wills and "do not resuscitate" and who should sign that "do not resuscitate"? When is it an official document? When should it be used or couldn't be used?

JW: Was that '93?

AC: '93, I believe.

JW: That was a tough issue. I got castigated a little bit editorially by some newspapers on that. I don't really know why. I think they misunderstood my position on it. But it was a tough issue, and I remember some of the testimony we had of what happened to family members when the EMTs arrived, and they were required to do everything they could, and what happens to people in that situation.

It was a difficult issue. I was thinking that was prior to '93, but it may have been '93.

AC: I noticed one in the '95 session. It was a House bill on school property tax phase-out of 35 mills, but then shifting it to sales and income tax. I think it made it past the house, but then there was that technical issue with the bill. So the House had to reconsider their action the next day, and you got them to at least stand firm and I believe to fix the technical issue, I guess.

JW: If you have time, I'll tell you the story about that.

AC: Sure.

JW: That was really [Sen.] Jerry Moran's bill in the Senate. Jerry came to me one morning in my office, and he had been trying to get that bill on the calendar in the Senate. Of course, he was in favor of that bill. So he asked me to take a look at it and see if there was anything I could do. I looked at it, and I got back [to him in] a couple of days. I agreed. I thought it was a good thing to do. It would have increased income and sales tax, both, and remove property taxes, a source of funding for the general fund in schools.

I had amendments drawn [for] two bills that were on the calendar that I thought were germane. One of them came through. It was a gut and go. We left the number.

AC: But not much else

JW: Not much else. I had adjusted a little bit. I didn't increase corporate income tax Jerry Moran had in his idea. There were probably a couple of other changes. But we had just passed the bill, and I believe Gloria Timmer came to me. She said, "You raised too much money. The legislative research made a mistake in figuring that."

So that was a tough night. I didn't sleep much. I went in the next morning and asked to reconsider and explained the issue. That day they worked in the Governor's Office and the legislative people and the revisers worked and got it so it was revenue neutral, which we had sold it on that basis. As I remember about 4:00, the thing was finished. So we started the debate again for another two hours. But this time, they were prepared better. The opposition was prepared better, but it did pass.

When it went to the Senate, the governor [Bill Graves], he was not very much in favor of that. He went to Jerry and agreed to appoint this special committee that would look at the issue if Jerry would agree not to run the bill, and that's what happened. It died [in the Senate].

AC: But it was still a good idea.

JW: Well, I don't know. I think there are advantages to the property tax. The bad thing about property tax is it's not connected very well to ability to pay but from the budget side, the good thing about it is it's stable. It brings some stability to revenue. So I don't know. I thought it was a good idea. I guess I still would think that, but school may be out a little bit on that. There's another side to the story.

AC: This is just kind of a fun item. It was in the 1997 session. You introduced legislation that would direct the Department of Wildlife and Parks to work with private companies to develop lodging and other facilities that are common in other states at state parks.

JW: I did. I was interested in that.

AC: In fact, I think the quote was that you were tired of going to Missouri and Oklahoma for your wife's family reunions.

JW: That's right.

AC: Have them come to Kansas.

JW: You know, I worked with them, and they identified areas where these cabins could be placed, and I was trying to do it through private enterprise to interest some developer. As it turned out, the State wound up doing it as you know, and they have those cabins I think at all the lakes now, and I think they're pretty popular.

AC: You were vindicated eventually.

JW: I guess eventually, but not the way I thought I would, but that maybe started the ball a little bit.

AC: Did you ever get your wife's family to come here for a reunion?

JW: No, we never have.

AC: Again, just looking through, we've touched a little bit on it, just some of the major issues through the years, the '91 session first established the skills program for lifelong learning. You're probably familiar with that. Kindergarten was made mandatory. Of course, school finance was almost in every one of these years that you were in there. There was something on school finance, all of that. '92, as you mentioned, a big session with the Enterprise Zone Act. That was a big deal and all that. Again, you created a task force on the funding of community colleges and the Kansas post-secondary vocational and technical training system. So even in '93, there was kind of effort to try and figure out the best way forward.

Then '94, granted the Secretary of Health and Environment [authority] to protect water from pollution, water pollution control permits, created the State Water Plan Fund, sorry, allowing the Water Plan Fund then to purchase capacity at federal reservoirs.

JW: We got a windfall somehow and used it to buy the water in those. I've forgotten what the windfall was. I think it was in the 18 million or something like that it cost us.

AC: Reinstated the death penalty. That year was '94.

JW: I didn't support that. It happened.

AC: Provided tax incentives for economic development, expanded sales tax, amended the Kansas Open Meetings Act to include telephone calls. I guess did you ever get much pushback from local units of government about the Kansas Open Meetings Act causing problems, issues.

JW: No, I wouldn't say I got a lot of pushback. I think there was concern in every local government. They all resist it to some extent. But you know it's interesting, the telephone calls. Think about now with the ability to communicate now compared to then.

AC: That's right. '96, of course, the Skills Program was changed to the Impact Program. The Investments in Major Projects and Comprehensive Training Act there allowed funds for major projects for training for new employees, those kinds of things.

JW: I think the Skills Program may have been involved, my memory might be not perfect on this, but the first year I was here, this came first with the Kansas, Inc. thing, and I remember meeting, and it had to do with Sprint and the development of their educational park, I guess you would call it

AC: Right.

JW: In Overland Park. It seems to me that Skills Program was related to that. Would that be right?

AC: I think that does sound right. You're kind of testing my memory, too. I think that is correct. And of course in '96, you instructed the Board of Regents to do qualified admissions.

JW: Yes. That was a stormy one.

AC: How were you on that one?

JW: I was supportive. I think I was on that bill. Of course, Ralph Tanner and I, and we had two or three. Barbara Ballard was in favor of it, and Carol Sader as I remember supported it. So we had a few Democrats that were helpful on that.

AC: And created the Abandoned Oil and Gas Well Fund for plugging.

JW: That's still an issue. It is.

AC: '97, expanded tax increment financing law, the TIF law. Of course, amended local option budget and increased Homestead Property Tax Relief. Of course, school finance. And then in '98, the Rural Housing Incentive District Act helped with rural housing and established a new comprehensive grant program to help financial need I think with the students with higher ed, community college and higher ed in general, I think.

And the Confined Animal Feeding Act. That was '98.

JW: There was an animal thing, the hog wars were prior to that. That was in '94, I guess. In '98, we did have, and maybe you have it here, a big issue in regards to the LOB [Local Option Budget] and the school finance.

AC: Yes.

JW: I took a little beating editorially on that, too, because I supported a change in that. My view was that we had to change the LOB and provide a way for these districts who could absolutely not get support for an LOB to—there just had to be if our school finance system was going to survive, we had to change that.

And we did. I think Mike O'Neal chaired the Education Committee that year. So that was done, and we created a new way of looking at the LOB that was actually kind of an escalator. I'm not sure everyone understood that, but it was. It allowed school districts to access some additional funding through the LOB even though they couldn't get their patrons to support it in a vote.

AC: As you look back over those eight years, you've kind of touched on it, but just some of the driving issues during those sessions. Was it tax? Was it education, the budget, or maybe they just all get—

JW: Well, tax and education are perennial issues. I don't think that's probably changed at all. Gaming, I wasn't involved in that so much. Of course, tax and education are still, the amount of the budget that education takes is always going to guarantee that that is going to be a big issue, and it is. Of course later I became very involved in that piece of it with the work with the Board of Regents and that sort of thing.

AC: In doing some research for some other interviews, I read the history of the state Republican Party and looked at that period from '92 to '98. It was in that publication, it was called a conservative insurgency within the Republican Party.

JW: Yes.

AC: There was a merging of two distinct political agendas, one fiscal conservative that government had gotten too big, taxes were too high, doing too much, borrowing too much, and it needed to be reined in. Then the other one, of course, would have been the pro-life movement, that Summer of Mercy in Wichita '91. So then in 1992, there was that movement by the conservative group to take control of the state Republican Party starting with precinct people and going on up. So by 1994, [Rep.] David Miller was state Party Chair. Todd Tiahrt and Brownback were elected to Congress. Tim Shallenburger became Speaker.

JW: That was a change. It was.

AC: Would you call that a conservative insurgency?

JW: It was. It started in the '93 session. I think there was a little bit of a rebellion on the Republican side during the session. Of course, in '94, it went the conservative direction although Tim was very conservative and was part of that, but I don't know whether he was as conservative as some are currently.

AC: Did the Democrats in the House take advantage of that division?

JW: I think we probably tried to. I wouldn't say they didn't. I think there was a time the Democrats were, and maybe prior to my coming here, when the rebels were in their heyday. I think the Democrats made common cause with them from time to time.

AC: Saw an opportunity.

JW: I suppose.

AC: We talked about reapportionment. And then you mentioned you were on Governor Finney's boat one time. When you were in the legislature in those eight years, much interaction with the governor, the Governor's Office, either Governor Finney or Governor Graves or his staff, her staff?

JW: Maybe both to some degree. Governor Finney, some. We were out to Cedar Crest from time to time and saw her play the harp and those kinds of things. I wouldn't say a lot, but there was some. Of course, I got along well with Governor Graves. I had a lot of respect for Governor Graves and of course more later when I was on the Regents. I was maybe out there more.

AC: When you think back over those eight years of service in the legislature, if you look back now and you think maybe your proudest accomplishments or accomplishment or ments? Singular or plural?

JW: I don't know if I would pick anything out particularly. I hope I was responsible. I hope I made a difference a little bit. I'm not going to take credit for anything that happened. I tried to do my job, and I thought after eight years, it was time to go ad let someone else do it, and so that's what I did.

It was never easy for me to win, as you know. I was one of those 52 to 54 percent guys. That wasn't easy to attain. It was always a little bit of a struggle. And of course, being in the minority for six years, I could never chair a committee or could never do those kinds of things, you begin to maybe question as to whether you might be better off doing something else.

But in looking back, it was a good eight years. I worked with some wonderful people. I think we did some good things.

AC: You had six children.

JW: Six.

AC: You spent eight years, at least four or five months out of the year up here in Topeka.

JW: Well, I did. Of course, they were pretty well up there. In fact, we went just last week. My wife and I were in North Carolina, and my youngest son retired from the military in thirty years.

AC: And his rank was?

JW: He was a colonel.

AC: That's great. Any big disappointment that you were so close to maybe getting something across the finish line that you could have almost tasted it, but the stars didn't line up, and it didn't happen?

JW: I think every year at the end of the session when you leave, there's a little bit of that feeling because there were some things you worked on. The higher ed thing, I worked really hard on trying to get that movement going. Nothing happened while I was here.

I did, after my last session, I was on the task force that Governor Graves appointed which worked on a new system for higher education which was somewhat different than what developed, but it was close because Christine Downey and others were on that task force, too, and they took that theory or that philosophy and created it within the Board of Regents. So it did happen, but it happened a year after I was gone. So that would have been a little bit of a disappointment, but by and large, it was fine.

AC: We mentioned it just briefly, but of course, another issue for years would be the abortion issue.

JW: Yes.

AC: Certainly probably a difficult issue.

JW: My position was pro-life at that time. My last year here, I think there were forty-eight Democrats, and I think twelve of us were leaning towards the pro-life side. I always tried to be respectful of people who had a different view on that. I think there is an argument on the other side of that issue. But we did pass some pro-life legislation, and I thought it was reasonable at the time. But, of course, that's all different now.

AC: Yes. Here's this required question we're going to ask. We ask all our people. It's a personal identity question. So personal identity is loosely defined as gender, age, race, class, sexual or gender orientation, marital status. Did you in your experiences during the time in the legislature, did you believe your personal identity influenced your ability to pass policy, work

with fellow legislators, or provide constituent services? Were you ever given committee assignments or tasks that you believe were functions of your personal identity? That's it.

JW: I mean, those elements are what make people who they are. I think this is a people business. So I think people, the persona I guess, of people makes a difference. I suppose, I think I had some credibility on school finance simply because of the experience I'd had in the past, and maybe undeservedly but I think I did a little bit. Whether I ever received committee assignments, I think obviously they try and fit those to a person's skills or life experience and the economic development committees and the education committees were part of that. I guess I just view it as this is a human enterprise.

AC: It certainly is.

JW: And those things are involved in being human.

AC: Yes. Maybe just another philosophical question. Should a legislator vote their personal views or should they vote their views of their constituents?

JW: I think that's always a question, and there's always a balance there. I think one some of these moral issues that a person has to vote his conscience. Now on a lot of things, it's not that way, but I watched the debates here on capital punishment and on abortion and on some of those kinds of issues, and I see people go up here to the well. I never really did on those issues, go up and speak to it much. They're speaking from the heart. I think in those areas, I think you have to be willing to vote in a way that could cost you the next election. You ought to understand that.

In my district, I was opposed to capital punishment. That was certainly a majority of my district did not support that. I felt strongly enough, I felt, "Well, that's the way I think. If I'm defeated as a result of that, then I am." So I think there are cases, but I think a lot of times, it has to do with the way you do things, and you can fit it into your—I think a legislator has some responsibility to lead or attempt to lead, develop public opinion in his district. That issue has always interested me. In later years, I've written columns and all.

AC: Quite a few of them.

JW: Quite a few. That's been an issue that I've always been interested in is how public opinion develops. I think in too many cases, legislators maybe are just followers of public opinion, and some other element out there is involved in creating it. I think legislators need to be involved in trying to form public opinion or try and gain support for certain things that are important. Anyway, that's a long answer. That's a long, windy answer.

AC: Good answer. I did notice in the one information, in terms of contributions from different organizations, your list was pretty long. You attracted a lot of money from different organizations. Is that just all part of the process?

JW: I think it is. I don't think I ever solicited anything. It came when you begin to take positions. Then organizations that believe in that position tend to support that the next election. So it just happened. I was never a very good fundraiser. I was never a very good politician to be honest with you. Certainly I wasn't a very good fundraiser, and I just sort of took what—

AC: Well, elected four times, no primary opposition. You must have been doing something right.

JW: Well, maybe.

AC: So you served eight years in the legislature. During those eight years, did you ever notice a kind of a change in how the legislature worked or just in terms of how it functioned or the organization, how it conducted its business? Was it pretty much the same during those eight years?

JW: I think, as I mentioned, I think the Appropriations Committees became more influential all the time during that eight years. I think they got involved and still are in policy to some degree that maybe they didn't when I first came here. I think maybe that would have been a change.

Other than that, I don't know. It did become more conservative in the management.

AC: The institution, the process works. It did work. It still works?

JW: I'm not that close to it now. I'm not going to comment as to whether it still works. I just follow it in the paper a little bit. It seems to me that the current legislators get involved in some things that we didn't get involved in at that time like health policies and things of that kind.

AC: Do you ever think the opportunity would be right that you'd ever consider running for the legislature again or elected office?

JW: Of course, I'm way beyond that age wise.

AC: You have a lot of wisdom. Sometimes that's good.

JW: No, I've never given that any thought. I really enjoyed the after-the-legislature years with the association with the Board of Regents. In many respects, I was able to maybe accomplish more there than I could in the legislature, fewer numbers. In those elements, I was in some formative periods. I was on the first board after Senate Bill 345 was passed. So we had to create a new system for the Board of Regents. I got to be involved in that. And then a few years later, '07, I think, the legislation was passed creating the Technical Authority, Tech Ed Authority. I was on that initial board. So we got to create a system again. Those were challenging things and were interesting. Those jobs or those positions I guess insulated me from regretting leaving the legislature.

AC: So more cantankerous, I don't know, challenging state legislature or higher education, Board of Regents, faculty, administration, all of that when you were on the board. I guess they each probably had their own challenges.

JW: They each had their own challenges. There were some significant challenges. In '03, I was Chairman of the Board of Regents. We had some issues during that year, one being that we had to replace our executive director, and we had a three-month period that we didn't have one. I kind of got intensely involved in that management at that point.

Then, of course, we had a terrible happenstance during that year. Roy Williams [KU Basketball Coach] resigned. In Jayhawk world, that was an absolute disaster. Bill Self kind of healed it a little bit.

AC: It's worked out, I guess. But I noticed it was 2006, you did run for the State Board of Education.

JW: I did.

AC: From your district. Was it Hutchinson, Kingman, Ellsworth, McPherson, Great Bend, kind of that south central?

JW: We even had part of Wichita. It was pretty large. We had fifty-two school districts. I visited fifty during that run. I came up to see [Governor] Kathleen [Sebelius] at that time. I was interested in seeing someone run as an Independent. The Democrats didn't stay out of it. I proposed that to her, but then we had a couple of them filed early out west, and it ruined that idea. So I came up here. I know Mel Minor --you remember Mel Minor.

AC: Certainly, yes.

JW: He and I came up and talked to the governor. "Well," she said, "I think one of you ought to run." So Mel's wife had some health issues at that time. He wasn't in a very good position to run. But he called me and he said, "Are you going to run? If you don't, I guess I will."

Anyway, I finally decide I would go ahead and make a run. It was pretty hopeless from the beginning.

AC: You got 49 percent of the vote.

JW: We got pretty close. At the end, I thought we were going to win. But we got pretty close. We ran a pretty good race. Mel was my treasurer in that race.

AC: You did very well in Rice County.

JW: I did.

AC: 2,100 votes, and it was Ken Willard who was the opponent. He only got about 900 in Rice County.

JW: There were some areas up north in Clay Center and all I had trouble in. In Wichita, of course, I had trouble down in that Bel Aire area and that northern part of Wichita. But I had a pretty good organization put together, and I had co-chairmen in every county. I had a Democrat and a Republican co-chairman in every county. We made a pretty good effort.

AC: Yes. By the results, it was pretty close. You got 49 percent of the vote.

JW: It was pretty close, but there wasn't any cigar.

AC: So if you're on Main Street in Lyons or over in Little River and somebody comes up to you and says, "I'm thinking about running for the legislature, what would you tell them?"

JW: Well, I think I would encourage them if I thought they would be a good legislator. If it was someone that I thought wouldn't, I don't know if I would. I think it's a worthy thing to do. I'm awfully disappointed. In our area, to be honest with you, I've never seen our representative. It just isn't like it was. I mean, when LeRoy Fry was doing it or I was doing it or Bob Bethel was doing it, we had all these coffees. There was a lot of interaction with constituents and this sort of thing, and we had quite a bit of constituent interest. There's no constituent interest now. Part of it, in our part of the world, there's not much of a relationship between the legislators and the constituency. We just assume if they're Republican, they're going to win, and that's just the way it is.

AC: Ever any passing thought of running for the Senate from your district, your area?

JW: No. When I left here, I was finished with the political thing. So there wasn't any thought of running again to anything. I got very involved with Habitat for Humanity for a while and did some other things kind of locally. Then I have my rental stuff that I still do even at this advanced age.

AC: Anything else maybe that you'd like to discuss or any issues or topics that we haven't touched on?

JW: Not really. I appreciate the opportunity to talk about this stuff. You know, some of it comes back when you begin to talk about it that you hadn't thought of for years.

AC: You remember that refrigerator speech though.

JW: I remember the refrigerator speech. I do. I remember I carried the bill on the hog thing when the Seaboard people came in. Bob Mead was a committee chairman, and I was the

ranking minority. He had me carry that bill. I remember that talk I gave, too, which I felt like maybe was the best one I'd ever given. That did get through. I remember, of course, the Democrats, the influential Democrats, the rural Democrats were very opposed to that. Governor Finney, I think I visited her every day during that period of time until she signed that bill because I thought it needed to pass even though it wasn't perfect, and it wasn't popular in some quarters.

AC: Well, you've had a great career of public service in the legislature, the Board of Regents, the Tech Authority. Certainly your service has made a difference. I'm certainly pleased to sit down and visit with you a little bit today, and I appreciate you coming to Topeka. You probably know the road pretty well.

JW: Well, I do. I reacquainted with it today. I don't get up here very much anymore.

AC: Thanks for your time today for the Kansas Oral History Project. Thanks again for your public service. Clearly, you've made a difference.

JW: Thank you, Alan. I appreciate it. I hope so.

AC: Very good.

[End of File]