Interview of ROBIN JENNISON by Jim McLean, October 4, 2019
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Jim McLean: The date is October 4, 2019, and we're here in midafternoon in the House Chambers in the Kansas State House in Topeka, Kansas. I'm Jim McLean, a reporter and editor of the Kansas News Service. I covered the legislature and Kansas politics for more than thirty years. I will be interviewing Robin Jennison, a former Kansas representative who held various leadership positions in the House. I'll be conducting the interview on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, Inc., a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing former legislators, particularly those who served from 1960 to 2000. The interviews will be made accessible to researchers and educators. These interviews are funded in part by a grant from the Kansas Humanities Council. The audio and video equipment is being operated by David Heinemann, himself a former member of the Kansas House.

And, Robin, just a second, I want to introduce you here. Robin Jennison is from Healy, Kansas. Healy is located in the southwest part of the state. He served in the Kansas House of Representatives from 1991 through 2000. He served in several leadership positions. As we mentioned, he was the chair of the Appropriations Committee. He was majority leader, and finally speaker in the 1999 and 2000 sessions.

He ran for governor in 2006, but you didn't get elected that year. But you ran for governor in 2006, spent several years around the Capitol as a lobbyist for various organizations. In 2011, Governor Sam Brownback appointed Robin Jennison to head the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks. He stepped down from that position in 2018 to become the general manager of the Kansas State Fair, and that's a position he still holds. Nice to see you again.

Robin Jennison: Good to see you, Jim.

JM: We appreciate you being here. We like to ease into these conversations by just having you talk a little bit about what inspired you to run for public office in the first place. Can you remember?

RJ: My family was always very political. I had an uncle who had actually been speaker of the House. He had actually run for lieutenant governor back when you ran separately from the governor. I never aspired to be in elected politics, but I did like politics. I had a Spiro Agnew watch when I was a kid. I was in politics, I guess.

I was very involved in Farm Bureau. My predecessor, [Representative]Max Moomaw [Dighton] had decided not to run and asked me if I wanted to run for the legislature, and I said, “No, I'm really enjoying what I'm doing.” I was on the board for the Kansas Farm Bureau. I was a relatively young board member to be on the board for the Kansas Farm Bureau. I got to go somewhere south of the Mason Dixon line every winter for an annual meeting and do what I enjoyed doing, running cattle out in Western Kansas, and my life was happy.

We had an annual meeting, and we had two board members—it was just kind of a happy family at that point. We had two board members that had significant competition, and they got beat. When I got home, I called Max, and I said, “You know, Max, if politics is going to enter the

Kansas Farm Bureau board of directors, if I'm going to be in politics, I might just as well be in it for real, and I would like to run."

So I ran. The first year, I had a four-way primary, and a lady that ran against me in the general ended up getting elected.

JM: Why do you think Max approached you in the first place? What was it about what you were doing then that made you somebody who he thought wanted to be here?

RJ: I was involved in politics, but Lane County has always been very protective of having that position in that district, regardless of really what district we were in. It goes back, when we quit having one person per county, that's what it was when my uncle Robert was in, Lane County had the lion's share of legislators for whatever district we were in. At one point, there was a fellow from Ness, I can't recall his name, but Lane County got very protective of that position. I think at the time, I might have been the most likely person from Lane County to run. That may be why Max approached me.

JM: How many counties were in that district?

RJ: When I first started, it was Lane, Ness, Hodgeman, and then really rural Finney. I didn't have the far western part of Finney County, but I had most of the rural part, and then [Representative]David [Heinemann] had really Garden City.

JM: And Dighton is in Lane County?

RJ: Dighton is in Lane County.

JM: The reason I ask is because I recently interviewed [Representative] Don Hineman. I looked it up. He represents all of eight counties and part of a ninth.

RJ: Yes.

JM: So the districts have gotten bigger geographically since you represented.

RJ: It has. Actually the first reapportionment that I went through, I was still in tolerance because I had Garden City. Does Don still have any of Finney County?

JM: I don't think so.

RJ: Because of Garden City's growth, the first reapportionment I went through, I was still within tolerance's. But they went ahead to give [Representative] Gary Hayzlett who represented that area, they gave him a little more of Garden City, and then that forced me to go further east. I got the western half of Rush County. I ended up with the western half of Rush County.

JM: And those districts changed over time. Forty years ago, that was also the district, when your uncle was in the legislature, did he represent that district?

RJ: When he was in, he only represented Lane County.

JM: Then Don's father, Kalo [Hineman], was also—

RJ: He represented the district.

JM: So you were ranching?

RJ: Our family has been out in Healy since 1887, and my dad and brother and I were running what was Jennison Ranch, which was started by my grandfather.

JM: Still going strong these days?

RJ: Still going. My brother and his son run it now.

JM: How much bigger has it gotten?

RJ: It's gotten a lot bigger than what it was originally. My brother had graduated. I had not yet graduated from college when Dad and the two uncles bought another section of ground. Then Dad, they bought—we always had a Hereford cow herd, and Dad bought forty head of registered cows because that's what I always wanted to do, have a registered cow herd. We divided up the area of responsibilities. I ran the cow herd. My brother ran the—we had a little feed lot. Dick ran that and the agriculture part. Then Dad told us what to do basically.

JM: And you left that idyllic life behind to come here.

RJ: I joke with people. I had a great life because I got to do what I really enjoyed, which was being out there, running the cattle. I didn't like driving a tractor, but I did enjoy agriculture, and then I'd get to come down here in the winter. So my brother would have to feed the cattle in the winter while I was here at the legislature.

It was really a fun life. You got the best of both worlds. I was an outdoor person. I preferred to work outdoors but also got to have the exposure of being here.

JM: How old were you when you ran the first time for the legislature?

RJ: When I ran the first time, it would have been in '90. I was born in '54. So fortysomething?

JM: So you waited a while. You didn't have a burning desire—

RJ: I think I must have been forty-two. I was thirty-six when I got elected to the Farm Bureau Board.

JM: It sounds like one of the reasons you ran is because you were approached and because things had gotten political at the Farm Bureau. Obviously when you were approached, something about that intrigued you and had you thinking about it, right?

RJ: I read politics. We were very involved politically, just not necessarily elected politics.

JM: Was there a particular issue at that time though that you really cared about?

RJ: I'd gotten involved in environmental issues. I'd been on a national environmental committee. Environmental issues, that's what I thought would be the important thing. Well, Max talked to me and really encourage me to be on the education committee. It was so important to rural schools. I think probably it was Max's influence that I was able to get on the education committee my first two years.

JM: That is interesting. That will lead us into a conversation that I think is really important to have. When you first arrived here, that school finance issue was a big deal. What's interesting about what you said is when former Governor Mike Hayden, who again was a legislator and a former speaker of the House was interviewed, that's what propelled him into politics was his interest in environmental issues.

RJ: I think there are a lot of folks like us, we're in a business, I was in a business that is criticized a lot from the environmental community, but I think there are a lot of those folks that really care more about the environment than maybe what we're able to do. You've still got to make money. I think the worst things that we've done in Western Kansas was mine the Ogallala aquifer. We have changed what is going to be the face of Western Kansas at some point. It's started. I think there were a lot of people that knew we were mining it too hard, but you just didn't have the ability to shut it off and still make money.

I'd always been involved in environmental issues when I was in the Farm Bureau, but the interesting thing about that was that's why I ran, but I was never involved in environmental issues the whole time I was up here with the exception of being pretty involved in the corporate hog-farming debate, which has an environmental side to it.

JM: Of course, it does. Remind me, if we don't get back to that topic before we finish, remind me because I would like to go back to that topic with you relative to the Ogallala and Western Kansas. I think it's something that was a big issue then. It's a big issue now. It's going to continue to be a big issue in the future.

RJ: It will.

JM: You got here at Max's suggestion. You sought a seat on the Education Committee and got it. So when you first got here, you weren't a chair, but you had a seat on that committee.

RJ: Yes.

JM: Which puts you right in the middle, that second session you were here, right?

RJ: Yes.

JM: Of that school finance debate that was really pivotal. Some things were changed pretty drastically with the legislation that went through that year, right?

RJ: It was. I tell people, and I told Speaker [Marvin] Barkis this. There's not been a Republican speaker elected that could have done what he did. He made probably the most sweeping change to school finance this state has ever seen with a one-vote margin. There's not a Republican speaker been elected that could have done that. While I disagreed with the law, the bill, but it was a marvelous job on the part of Marvin and his caucus.

JM: Maneuvering it through the process.

RJ: Yes.

JM: You came to appreciate that, particularly in retrospect—

RJ: After I was speaker, I really appreciated it.

JM: You had more than a one-vote majority.

RJ: Oh, we did. We had a great majority. I don't remember what it was, but we had a sizable majority.

JM: Sometimes you have to get really creative when the margins are that thin. But you said you didn't agree with the policy. Let's just talk a little bit about that because the idea there was because of variations on how property was evaluated and how much wealth there was from one county to the next, the idea was they wanted to equalize the tax burden across the state, essentially put everybody on an equal footing so they created this statewide mill levy. Why were you opposed to that?

RJ: I don't know if you remember, but we had a Republican alternative. When they first came out with the first one the Democrats had, it had the mill levy at 45. We put together—I may have been the chief author of it. [Representative] Mike O'Neal was higher on the food chain.

JM: He chaired the committee, did he not?

RJ: Yes, he was, but he was not on education, and I was. Our philosophy was that what the school district really needed was a broader tax base. So we had a formula that gave them the sales tax and continued to give them the income tax because there were schools like you had some urban districts that had put out IRBs and really given away some of their tax base. A sales tax would have been very good for them. I think a sales tax would have been very good for Wichita in fact to give them some more money.

So our formula actually gave them all three taxes if they chose, and then it was all equalized, and I don't recall how we did that. We took the average mill levy down to I think it was 35 mills.

JM: In your bill.

RJ: I say the average. There were some higher than that, and there was obviously some lower than that.

JM: So you were still allowing some variation.

RJ: Yes, we took the average. The first amendment made was Chairman Bowden carried that on the—

JM: Rick Bowden.

RJ: Yes, on the floor. As soon as he explained the bill, he asked for an amendment. The first amendment was to take it down to the 35 mills, which was—that's the max anybody would pay. Then that got on, and then I carried on our amendment, and we got, I don't know, 50-some votes, something like that.

JM: Pretty close.

RJ: There were some Republicans that did not vote for it, but we got quite a few votes. Then ultimately they prevailed, and then the Senate really labored with that. We came back for that veto session, and we didn't really have a lot to do in the House because the Senate was just having such a challenge doing something.

JM: And you were under the gun because you came back from the veto session. In those days, those veto sessions were pretty sure.

RJ: They tried to be. That was a long veto session though.

JM: That one was. But typically in those days—

RJ: Three or four days.

JM: You didn't leave all the heavy lifting, like sometimes happens these days, but that year with Judge [Terry] Bullock here in Shawnee County, I mean, you were pretty much under the gun to get something done that session.

RJ: That was the interpretation. I've always thought that we should have let that play out and take it to the Supreme Court back then. I think the challenge that I had with the—when I first got here in Education, the year I was here in Education, we had some excellent testimony because typically you would have the Kansas Association of School Boards on one side and the KNEA on the other. They were both very good organizations. They knew what they were talking about, and as a member of the education committee, we had outstanding testimony from both of them. Then we'd make up our mind.

After we passed school finance, the new school finance, then basically what was important to both of those was getting the state money for the school. I think it really made the debates less. We didn't have the opposing sides coming in and giving us their view of the world. The challenge that I saw with what we ultimately did was it just doesn't work. When the school board has to levy a local tax, they're more responsible with the money. When they're getting it from the state, they're not nearly as responsible with the money. I don't necessarily have a problem with the state funding the schools. I just think, and nobody's going to want to do this, but since I'm not elected, I can say this, if the state is going to give the money to the school, then the state needs to have more control over how the schools spend that money. I don't think we ever did that part.

JM: That's interesting. That's a debate that is still raging here at the State House, that accountability debate, and what is the role of the state relative to the local school districts. The way that functioned though is that mill levy, that standardized mill levy, those local taxes were levied. The money came to the state and was redistributed based on a lot of weighting formulas and a whole bunch of other things. It was kind of a pass-through thing, and again the notion there was to equalize funding across the board. You weren't necessarily opposed to that goal. You just had a different way of getting there.

RJ: Yes. Property taxes were extremely high back then. They were too high, and they continue to be. I think the biggest tax problem we've had in Kansas has been property tax. There's a lot said about sales tax and income tax, but the fact of the matter is, the biggest problem we have is property tax.

JM: Because it doesn't tax people necessarily on their ability to pay.

RJ: That's exactly right. We've never modernized to where we've recognized that property taxes are paying for a lot of things that are not services to property. If you go back to the way property tax, I think, should function, it should be services to property. We've gone way past that. I think that more importantly, it's this idea of not having the entity that's raising the taxes being the one that's setting the rules. I think that's just the flaw with the school finance system we've got now, and it even went further. These are two of my dear friends that thought this up

originally but Kent Glasscock and Steve Lloyd wanted to equalize constructions of buildings. That's even worse because there's no parameters on what you're going to build with that equalized amount of money that's going to build buildings. I think at least with that, the state should be setting some parameters on what do we need in a school building.

JM: It's interesting. I hear echoes of current political debates in everything you say. [Secretary of State] Kris Kobach was running for governor. One of the big issue was if school districts were struggling to the extent, why do I see so many really nice school buildings across the state? It's because that money's available. There's an imperative to spend it.

RJ: And you talk about schools. When I came to the legislature, the richest school district in the state was Shawnee Mission per capita. The second richest school in the state was Healy, Kansas, USD 468. USD 468 was one section over what it took to meet the minimum requirements in size to be a school district. The way that they did that back in the sixties when they consolidated is they went up into Gove County, western Gove County is very sparse. There's not very many people living out there, and they got enough land to get over 200 square miles to be a school district.

&Then as good fortune would have it, there was oil struck up in Gove County, and that's how Healy happened to be the second richest school district in the state. Well, Healy and Shawnee Mission have something in common, other than that. Healy's population is getting older as was Shawnee Mission's, and Shawnee Mission was landlocked because you had the new school districts coming in, the ones that were growing. There was a lot more in common with Healy and Shawnee Mission than most people would realize. But Healy, Kansas is now the smallest school in this state. I think the number is something like forty people, K through 12. That's too small. I will guarantee you that Healy, Kansas would not have had a school as long as it had, had it not been for the new School Finance Formula.

JM: That's interesting. So what are you trying to say there, that one of the unintended consequences of that formula was to keep schools open that shouldn't have been open?

RJ: It has because it took away the board's reason to make good—they didn't have any impetus to make good decisions.

JM: The money was going to come regardless.

RJ: They were getting all this money. The money's all coming. I think we can say that with Healy and the size of Healy, but I think that thing applies to a lot of other decisions that boards across Kansas make because the money is still going to come.

JM: That's a really interesting discussion, the nuances you were talking about. But for you on the other hand to come back and say things that, regardless of what your position on the legislation, you can appreciate the way Speaker Barkis maneuvered it through the process, right?

RJ: I studied him. I watched Marvin, when that happened, I just thought that was the most amazing thing that I'd ever seen.

JM: How do you think he did it? What was it?

RJ: I think, by and large, the Democrat Party has, I think especially in Kansas, they are typically the minority party. They understand how you have to operate if you're not the—occasionally they take control of state government.

JM: By a seat or two.

RJ: By a seat or two, like they did then. I think they understand how important it is to realize the commonalities that you have with someone and emphasize those and not worry so much about the things you don't have in common, which is something that I think the Republican Party has had a struggle with for a long time.

JM: That leads us into a conversation I wanted to have with you about your time as speaker. I think what you're saying is, it's kind of an embarrassment of riches. When you are in the majority for so long, you kind of lose an appreciation, and people get kind of nit-picky, "I'm not going to be with you on this" for what you might think in leadership to be a pretty small reason. It's hard to hold the troops together even though you have a commanding majority, sometimes, right? Is that what happens?

RJ: It is. I think that's the way some people took it. That's one of the lessons that I learned from Tim Shallenburger. Tim didn't really care how you voted as long as you voted with the leadership on rules issues. I kind of adopted that philosophy, too. I think there were speakers in the past, some that I never served with and know, but speakers in the past that they tried to control votes much harder than Tim or I ever did. I kind of adopted that philosophy that Tim had, "Be with us on the rules, but this is the place for debates and votes, to see where everybody is." Other than that and the final budget, I liked to try to keep the troops together on the budget. Sometimes that was a little tougher.

JM: That's what it took to get out of here every year. That was the last thing you did. You followed Tim Shallenburger as speaker. Tim famously was the first "social conservative" who was elected to that post. Politics were changing in Kansas.

RJ: Oh, they were.

JM: When you were here. You followed him. As I ask everybody who I do these interviews with, I don't to impose a label on you, but what political label would you—are you a conservative Republican? Are you a moderate? Are you somewhere in between?

RJ: In today's standard or when I was—

JM: How about then and now?

RJ: I was definitely a conservative then. I think I'm a conservative now. I think you've got to work with other people though to accomplish anything. However many branches of the Republican Party, they need to work together to accomplish anything. I think that Republicans and Democrats need to work together. I've had a lot of good Democrat friends over the years that we still can socialize with and have a good time. We may disagree, but I think that's the thing that both here in Topeka and especially in Washington, DC that is really starting to cause us some problems is that the different people in the two parties can't get along. You just have to be able to get along.

I think that was starting to change. I remember [Representative] Bill Bryant, who was kind of a mentor of mine, was a veterinarian from up in Washington County. One time Bill and I were out one evening having an adult beverage together. He said, "You know, Robin," this kind of came out of the blue, he said, "The problem with the legislature is we don't drink enough whiskey to pass good legislation." I looked at him, "What are you talking about?" He said, "No, seriously, when I first got down here, Republicans and Democrats would go out and socialize." He said, "I even remember times when the governor would be out." It was the Caravan Club, I think. It was not here when I was here, but they would be out at the Caravan Club. He said, "They'd rehash the stuff. The next day, everybody would go in and we'd give our speeches, and the press would write down what we said, and then we'd vote, and we'd take care of what we decided we were going to take care of last night." He said, "The guys today, they just don't want to socialize with each other, and they don't get to know each other. You've got to know each other and know where someone is coming from to be able to work with them."

That was changing. Bill saw that changing when we were there. I'm going to say that was probably '94 or '96, and I don't know if it started to improved now or not.

JM: Why do you think that is though?

RJ: I don't know.

JM: Everybody says that. What causes that?

RJ: I don't know. I could see it starting to get a little worse when we were here within our party, but I was too close to it. We had a pretty good speaker's election when Susan [Wagle] and I ran against each other. It took a couple of years for us to get over that.

JM: She'd been pro tem, right?

RJ: She'd been pro tem, and I had been chairman of Appropriations.

JM: How close was that race?

RJ: Three or four votes, I think. It was a close race.

JM: Both of you were essentially conservatives. You were rural; she was urban.

RJ: And we had been great friends throughout the legislature. We came in at exactly the same time. We had both worked with Representative] Tim Shallenburger when he ran against [Speaker] R. H. Miller. We had been allies the whole time, and then when we ran against each other, it took a little while to get over.

JM: So Shallenburger was speaker, Susan was pro tem, and you were majority leader?

RJ: Yes. I was chairman of Appropriations and the majority leader. That was it. The leadership team was Tim and me and Susan.

JM: The two of you then ran for his spot. What was your pitch to the caucus in that race, do you remember?

RJ: I can't remember. The positive that I'd had from my legislative career is, the first year I was here, I was on Education, the first two years. I got some visibility on that, carrying that amendment. Then we were going back in the majority. Everybody was running for upper-level positions, and I'm sitting out on the tractor one day, thinking, “Nobody's running for assistant majority leader.”

I call a couple of people who I respect and say, “Are you sure you're going to run for that? You sure you don't want to run for assistant majority leader?” They said, “Yes, I'm not going to run for assistant majority leader.” I sent out a letter and said I was going to run for assistant majority leader.” I ran and got elected for assistant majority leader in my second term. I don't think anybody ran against me, if I remember that right.

I liked that position, at that time, the party whip. I liked that position, and I was going to run for that again, and then I helped Tim get elected, and then he appointed me chairman of Appropriations. That was probably my favorite job in the legislature the whole I was here, except the challenge with that is that you had off-session jobs that you didn't really set the schedule on. You had committees that you'd have to go to. You were on the Cedar Crest committee, and you were on other committees. So farming, it just made it difficult for me. That's probably the biggest reason why I ran for majority leader. I just didn't see myself being able to stay in the legislature if I had to keep that job.

JM: Why did you like that Appropriations job so much? Obviously you deal with policy. Every spending decision has a policy implication, but it really it, you're keeping the books for the State, and you're setting priorities by how you spend the money.

RJ: There's so much you can do in an Appropriations Conference Committee Report.

JM: Is that when provisos were just starting to become more—

RJ: We used some of those. Appropriations—I tell you, R. H. Miller told me—he's the one—when I got elected assistant majority leader, he put me on Appropriations. I told him, “You don’t need to do that, R. H., I'm happy with assistant majority leader.” He said, “Robin, there's two committees where you can learn about state government, Appropriations or Rule and Reg.” He's exactly right. You learn more about state government being on those two committees than any other committee. It touches practically every other committee, and it was a fun committee. I enjoyed the work. I would have been glad to stay there a couple of years. I just couldn't do it. It was too demanding.

JM: What did you learn about state government serving on Appropriations? Did it confirm your worst fears about state government? Did it make you think that maybe state government operated better than you had thought? Was there any big takeaway from that time?

RJ: I think state government works pretty good. I think one of the biggest challenges is the legislature. I think one of the things that we do well is we do new things well, but we don't take care of the old things very well. A great example of that is we were having a conference committee, I think, was my first year—it was. Gus [Senator Bogina] was chairman on the senate side. Dave [Senator Kerr] was then the next year. We were having the conference committee. The Senate had put in to put new carpeting in the Judicial Center. That hadn't even come up in our debate, and Senator [Dick]Rock] was there, and finally after—we'd come back a couple of times and not taken the Senate's position on the carpet on the Judicial Center.

Senator Rock got Chairman Bogina's attention and made an impassioned speech about how bad this carpet looked over in the Judicial Center, and I said to him, “Senator, that did not come up in our debate. If you'll just take that out, I'll make you a promise. When we come back for the veto session, [Representative] Gayle Mollenkamp,” who's one of the most conservative guys here, I said, “I will take Subcommittee Chairman Mollenkamp over at the Judicial Center, and if it's as bad as what you say, we'll put that in our omnibus budget.”

Gayle and I meet a day ahead of time. We go over there. It looked like crap. Over at the Judicial Center, they put all of these troughs in the floors for the cables. This was before computers, but somebody had thought ahead. So they had all of these troughs. Well, then, instead of putting down carpet squares, they carpeted it. Then as they needed to work on it, they would cut that carpet and lay it back down. They're lucky some lady with heels didn't get hurt, badly hurt. It was terrible. Gayle comes back, puts it in his budget, and it was all fine.

But that just is an example of we just didn't take care of it. There may have been times when somebody from over there may have come over and said, “Hey, we need new carpet,” and it didn't make it through the process. Docking [State Office Building] is a prime example of us not taking care of a building. It's so easy to build new buildings and so difficult to take care of the

ones we've got. It's not just this legislature. We did the same stuff. The legislatures in general are not very good at taking care of stuff.

JM: No because they want to show their constituents the shiny new thing. That's interesting. You appear to me to be that kind of conservative. The initial political definition of conservatism essentially stems from you just take care of what you've got and kind of cover the basics, and then you do other things when you can afford to do it. That just seems to square with your overall philosophy that you just need to do a better job of maintaining those things.

RJ: I tell people, and this is a challenge here, this may be a little exaggeration, but there are 165 rational people in these two houses, but the end product is hardly ever rational because of what it takes to pass something. If you'd ask any one of these guys to solve a problem, they could probably solve it. But when it comes to getting 125 over here and 40 over on the other chamber to vote for it, it gets different.

JM: You have to get a little irrational now and then. Let's talk a little about your time as speaker. You served two years, and it wasn't the easiest time, right?

RJ: It wasn't. It was okay. We had some challenges getting over the speaker's race because we had a few moderates in the caucus, but it was basically we kind of split up what had grown to be a pretty good conservative majority under Tim. As you said, Tim was kind of the first leader of the conservatives and did a great job holding it together. I think had Tim wanted to run for a third term, he would have easily gotten elected.

JM: They might have allowed him to break precedent and do it.

RJ: He would have easily gotten elected. It was the first time since we put that group together that we'd run against each other. It made that first year tough. Even with that, I think we had a pretty good couple of years. We did the '99 Transportation Plan then. We restructured school finance then. That was a bipartisan. Kent Glasscock was the majority leader. I put him in charge of it. It was a bipartisan, I suppose pretty close to even numbers. I don't know that we divided that up based on the—it was a special committee.

JM: What you're saying is there were some interpersonal difficulties with personalities because of the closeness of the speaker's race, and that was inevitable with whoever was going to follow Tim in that position probably, Tim Shallenburger, but in terms of legislative accomplishments, you think you got some stuff going.

RJ: We took care of business, and we got some major stuff.

JM: Let's talk about that transportation bill in '99.

RJ: That was interesting because what we did—all governors do it. Nothing against Governor [Bill] Graves, but when they present their budgets to the legislature, there's some hokey

numbers in their budgets. They all do it. Governor Graves did it, too. We had a meeting that was Governor Graves and [Senate]President [Dick] Bond and me talking about the highway plan. The governor said something, “I'd like to do this, but it's not something that I'm going to fall on a sword for.”

JM: And it wasn't in his budget, right?

RJ: It wasn't in his budget at that point. So we decided to do it, but he wasn't going to help much basically was what it was. He'd had a good four years. I think he'd just gotten re-elected. It wasn't going to do anything for him. Anyway, so I told him, let me pass it over to the House first. I think President Bond actually, “We'll run it out of the Senate.” I said, “No, let me do it in the House first.” He said, “Why?” I said, “Because I'm going to pass it without a tax increase.” Governor Graves said, “How are you going to do that?” I said, “I'm going to use your numbers.” He said, “Well, that won't work.” I said, “It will work as good for this transportation plan as it did for your budget.”

So we did. That first transportation plan that came out of the house had no tax increase. I think it was a seven year plan, but I can't remember the years on it.

JM: You obviously allowed some bonding in that.

RJ: No, no bonding.

JM: Pay as you go.

RJ: It was pay as you go, used his numbers. The idea was that we would pass it the first time that way and get votes, which we did.

JM: So then it would have a little momentum.

RJ: President Bond, he had [Senator Ben] Vidricksen over there. You knew they could pass a transportation.

JM: He has a highway named after him.

RJ: So we passed it that way. It goes over to the Senate. They pass a more reasonable transportation plan, and it goes to conference.

JM: So you're acknowledging that the bill you passed wasn’t all that reasonable.

RJ: Oh, it wouldn't have worked. It didn't need to work. You just needed to get enough votes to get out of here, and we did it. Then the Senate passed a plan. Then we went and really negotiated from there between our plan and their plan and got one ready and passed it. We

would have passed it because it was good for Southeast Kansas. Governor Graves got a little nervous about it, but that's how we passed it, the '99 plan.

JM: That's interesting you should say that. You look back, and lots of things are important in a relative sense, but a lot of people look at the way the state has followed one comprehensive transportation plan with another, with another. The state has a reputation nationally for having a highway system that's in good shape. You've got to think that that had a lot to do with keeping the economy—the state and the economy of the state. It paid dividends, specific dividends.

RJ: There's no question. You take that back to the conversation we're having a little bit ago.

JM: About taking care of things?

RJ: About taking care of things. The reason that it's easier for us to take care of highways because our people see the highways. They drive on the highways. They see when you haven't a highway that hadn't been upgraded enough and starts having a lot of accidents on it, people see that, and they respond to it. I think that's why in Kansas—

JM: If somebody trips on the carpet in the Judicial Center—

RJ: Nobody knows.

JM: Nobody knows about it. [laughs]

RJ: I think that's why we've done a better job with highways. That all started with Mike.

JM: [Governor]Mike Hayden. That was a big deal for him.

RJ: When we did the '99 plan, I read Burdett Loomis's book about the '89 plan, just to kind of see how it all worked. That was a big deal. They really hadn't done anything like that before.

JM: It's interesting in Kansas. One of the things I really like about Kansas and being around Kansas politics is it's like one degree of separation. Burdett Loomis wrote that book because I got him a press pass. I was the news director over at the public radio station that allowed him to sit in and on the floor and essentially do journalistic work to help write that book.

RJ: It was helpful for me to read that book. It really was.

JM: So the transportation, that's something you look back on and say, “Okay, we really got something done.” Talk about now—we're started our conversation talking about the school finance plan in the past when you first got here. What did you do in 1999 to change that? What needed to be done then?

RJ: I don't know that we really did much to that. That's probably a good reason why I left. I was one of those guys that wouldn't have done much to have made that any better. I just thought the philosophy of it was so wrong.

JM: You didn't want to fix it or tweak it.

RJ: I didn't want to fix it. I thought the philosophy was so wrong. The fact of the matter is, now it's our school formula, and you've got to take care of it. It's probably a good thing that I left when I did because I just never did like it, never would have tried to—I wanted to go back the other way.

JM: And that wasn't feasible in your mind?

RJ: It wasn't feasible.

JM: Even with conservative majorities in the house?

RJ: No. School finance, it's too geographic. You've watched them. The runs come out. Everybody looks at the runs. That's how they vote. People do not keep their philosophical purity when it comes to school finance.

JM: Right. They're looking at the ledger lines.

RJ: I may be wrong, but I thought I always did. I knew that if Healy continued—and it was a no-state-aid school when I got here. That's the thing about this. Healy, Kansas, the only aid they got was transportation aid. They were a no-state-aid school.

JM: Because of the oil in Gove County.

RJ: Because of the oil in Gove County. Then it got to where—I don't even know how much they were getting. I remember one time when they were getting almost a million dollars when I was still in the legislature because of school finance. At that point I knew that it would be very difficult for them to make the decision that the time had come to consolidate with someone else.

JM: We talked about you being a conservative Republican. My recollection in the legislature, there was a group of conservatives that came from rural areas, the Cowboys. You kind of came in after that.

RJ: I was later than that.

JM: But the legacy persisted. You were one of those, and yet what really transformed this Chamber and ultimately a lot of state government sprang out of the abortion protests in Wichita. There was a social conservative movement that really led to Shallenburger's

ascendancy to the speakership and eventually Sam Brownback's election as governor. Where were you in that mix?

RJ: When I ran the first time, I was pro-life, but I didn't see the—I'm much more pro-life now than I was then. I supported the standard exemptions.

JM: Health of the mother.

RJ: Rape, incest, health of the mother, but it was not a big deal for me because living out in Western Kansas, abortion was just something that was there. I didn't know really anything about it. When I got into the legislature and then I learned about it, while I never gave a speech on abortion in my life, I don't believe in any exceptions anymore. I'm just pro-life. It's not really out of my religious belief. It's just I believe—it is, I guess—I don't know when life begins for sure, so I'm going to err on the side of caution, and I think that life deserves the protection of the Constitution.

That's just me. I've never tried to sway anybody one way or another. The first vote I made was counter to the regular exemptions. I wrote a letter—one of the advantages of being a rural legislator is the county papers will print your stuff. They're looking for stuff to print.

JM: The weekly papers, and they'll sit around for a week and people read them.

RJ: Yes, and people read them. So the first vote I made that was more pro-life than what I said—there were some moderate people who voted for me because they didn't think my stance was that bad on that issue. When I voted for a little tougher pro-life bill, I put it in the paper, and I said, “I got down here, and my views changed on it, and this is how I'm going to vote,” I got some letters, but that was the last year. From then on, I never did.

JM: You said you never gave a speech on it, but it was really the motivating factor for a lot of your colleagues.

RJ: Oh, it was, especially Wichita. The folks from Wichita were close to that issue, and they continue to be. That's what got some of those guys involved in politics.

JM: The Summer of Mercy protests. They signed up precinct committee people. They took over the Sedgwick County Republican Party. A big change in Kansas politics stemmed from those protests.

RJ: Oh, it did.

JM: Susan Wagle, for instance.

RJ: Susan had been pretty involved in the bingo issues before she got up here. I think she was very pro-life. I don't say “lobbied,” but she had been in Topeka on behalf of that. People like Mike Farmer—

JM: From Wichita.

RJ: Mike has left us now. He's passed on. He'd actually been one of the guys that got hauled off that summer. He was very dedicated to that. Mike was also consistent—he was a good Catholic. While he was pro-life, he was also against the death penalty, which a lot of the pro-life folks were not.

JM: Let me ask you this because we talked earlier about people not socializing like they used to and harder partisan lines being drawn. It seems to me because the abortion issue, politically speaking, is such a black-and-white issue to people on both sides of it that you draw that line, and that's the motivating factor for a lot of people in this chamber. Do you think that was one of the things that changed personal relationships around here, that issue?

RJ: I never thought about that, but it could be. I've heard comments said about folks that were pro-choice that were not right. I had some good pro-choice friends, and I knew why they were pro-choice. I had a friend that was pro-choice—either her or her mother almost lost a friend because of a botched abortion that was not done in the proper facility. She was pro-choice because that had had such an impact on her life. I don't think that you can say she's a bad person because her heart went out to a friend of hers that either died or almost died.

JM: Right. So you served two years as speaker, and then you left for a while. You left the legislature.

RJ: I left for about a year. What happened was I'd really gotten involved in the—or saw the advantage to trying to develop tourism in Kansas—if you remember one of the greatest bills we passed during the nineties was the Kansas Speedway and then Village West. That's when STAR Bonds got started, and now we've really kind of murked that up a little bit.

STAR Bonds got started—Kansas Speedway, I still say, it is the only true destination attraction we have in this state. That was done because we did it here.

JM: Bigger than the Ball of Twine? The Hand-Dug Well?

RJ: It is. It's something. It was a tough vote. There was some in Kansas City, they couldn't vote for it. If you remember, we used eminent domain to do that.

JM: They wanted it.

RJ: They wanted it, but they couldn't vote for it. That really made an impression on me. I've always hunted and fished and looked at just the outdoor opportunities that we had. We had

started this little company called Kansas Outdoors. We had a $250,000 promotion that first year right after I left the legislature. I started a radio show, and in the process of that, started doing a little lobbying. Horse Thief Reservoir asked me to do a little lobbying. I did some lobbying for Ruffin Companies on the gaming issue. It was supposed to start out as just kind of tourism kind of stuff, and that career took off pretty good. I was used to coming down here in the winter. I kept coming down.

JM: You didn't want to feed the cattle. You wanted your brother to keep doing that.

RJ: I didn't want to feed the cattle. It was cold. I sat out a year. I missed one legislative session. The Kansas Outdoors and the lobbying kind of started up. I ended up down here lobbying.

JM: So you did that and then—

RJ: Ran for governor.

JM: Why did you do that?

RJ: You know, I don't know. I had some people encourage me. To be honest with you, Tim, and I can't remember the numbers, Tim did not do very well against Kathleen [Sebelius, 1998] out West. He did okay in Johnson County. The theory was that I would do a lot better out west. If I could do pretty good in Johnson County, we could beat her [running for a second term in 2002].

I got my friend Dennis Wilson, who was very popular in Johnson County. I was just going to—I didn't raise enough money. I got this Prevost bus from a friend of mine, Butch Spray.

JM: He's a highway contractor.

RJ: Yes. I was in every county in Kansas twice. I had that bus in every county at least once. John Ballou [legislator] drove it for me. We had the funnest summer of my life, but I didn't raise enough money and so consequently couldn't win the primary. [Senators] Jim [Barnett] and Susan [Wagle] won the primary.

JM: Jim Barnett.

RJ: Jim Barnett and Susan [Wagle] won the [gubernatorial] primary.

JM: So Susan got her revenge on you.

RJ: She did, and we get along great now. We actually go out to eat together and have fun. I still felt like I—I talked about property taxes a lot then. I just felt like my mode of operation would be helpful. I was a little—she hadn't done it yet, but Kathleen, her view on Sunflower, which I anticipated that, and I ended up lobbying for Sunflower Electric, the coal-fired plant that—they had such a tough time getting.

I just was really interested, and I thought that Western Kansas needed somebody. It goes back to the corporate hog farming. That was great economic development for certain areas of the state. Western Kansas, rural Kansas, all of it, we've got to do something, or it's just going to continue to kind of dry up.

JM: I told you I wanted to get back to that. Maybe we can just talk briefly about that. The bigger farms get and the bigger the hog operations get and everything else because of equipment and technology, the fewer people it takes to run them, and then that's just a prescription for emptying out those towns out there. The population is just going to get sparser and sparser.

RJ: I know, but it's going to happen. One of the reasons why I was for corporate hog farming is if we can keep more people living out there, if all we're doing is farming, you're not going to have very many people living out there. If you could go back to where Western Kansas was growing milo, which didn't consume as much water as corn, and feed it to the hogs, we could continue to maintain a viable economy out there.

JM: Back to the Ogallala, too.

RJ: Yes, it's all connected. If we're going to use that water, let's move it up the food chain to where we can support more people working out there. I think that technology—we've done a lot with drought-tolerant crops. We've gotten to where out in Western Kansas, and my brother still does it, we adopted this, if we had six foot of moisture in the spring, we'd plant dry-land corn, which the old hybrids of dry-land corn, you never could have done that. You would have had to have had a phenomenal rain year to be able to do that.

So technology's improving. If we protect the groundwater, and I think we go up the food chain with our livestock production, we can maintain out there. We're still going to have small towns that aren't going to be out there, but the regional areas are going to continue to thrive.

JM: The Garden City's, the Dodge City's.

RJ: There are some good things that are going on out there. When I was a kid, we didn't have emergency services. Practically every little town has got an ambulance, and you can get a lot of stuff done at Garden City, Dodge City, even Scotts City that you had to go to Wichita, Denver, or Colorado Springs years ago. Things are improving out there. There's going to be less and less people, and that economy out there is what we have got to protect.

JM: I don't want to let you get away without talking a little bit about your service as a member of Governor [Sam] Brownback's cabinet. You headed Wildlife and Parks from when he was elected through 2018. That was a pretty long tenure there, right?

RJ: Yes.

JM: That fit very well with your interest in tourism. As I recall, tourism came over to Wildlife and Parks.

RJ: That was an executive [re]organization order under Governor Brownback.

JM: Because of your interest in it? Did you lobby for that?

RJ: How that actually happened is I had gotten a call from one of his staff people not too long after the election that asked if I was interested in being secretary of Wildlife and Parks. I said, "My life is pretty good right now. I'm lobbying. I get to go home every summer and fall." It was between Christmas. We'd gone out to Healy for Christmas, and we were getting ready to head to Chicago to visit my wife's folks, and I got another call from the staff person and said, "If we would move Tourism over, would you take Wildlife and Parks," and I said, "I'd have to think about that. Can I call you Monday?"

I think what Governor Brownback's thinking was, he wanted to try to streamline state government. I think he wanted to combine some agencies, and from what I gather, he considered combining Environment into Wildlife Parks, kind of make it like a small D and R, get Health to where it's just Health, and maybe even put that into something else. I don't know the discussion. This is something that I heard afterwards. But if he had done that, he would have kept Mike because Mike had an environmental background. I think there were people on his staff that were interested in this idea of moving Tourism over, and that's how come—

JM: Former Governor Mike Hayden, Former Speaker Mike Hayden—

RJ: Had been secretary.

JM: Had been secretary of Wildlife and Parks under Governor Sebelius.

RJ: Yes.

JM: Then you took over for Mike.

RJ: Yes. I think had it won out to move Environment over there, I think he would have probably kept Mike is what I hear.

JM: Talk a little about that job. What were you able to accomplish in that job, as you look back on it?

RJ: The big thing we accomplished in that job was we really got their revenues up. The one thing—and Sam was a great governor to work for, he gave you some overall goals, and then let you run it. We were able to increase the salaries over there. The biggest thing when we got over there, Parks didn't have any money at all. One of the years when Mike was secretary, I just happened to be at a subcommittee, and they weren't going to have enough room to pay their

payroll, and so he was withholding road money, and they found that out, one of the subcommittees. I swore if it ever happened to me, I'd tell them. The same thing happened that second year. We'd already planned on—we had a plan to pay for the cabins. The cabin program, which Mike started—

JM: Building small cabins at state lakes.

RJ: We only got 25 percent of that revenue because Wildscape, which was a foundation created to help Wildlife and Parks, they borrowed the money. Until it was paid for, we only got 25 percent. We were having to do the development costs, put in the cement floors, run the electricity, and take care of the cabins, and only getting 25 percent was bleeding the agency. I went to Sam, and it took 1.7 million dollars to pay that off, and he let us pay that off. That was a big deal.

We had less than $300,000 in balances when I was there. We knew that they needed to have more of that to sustain something like this. Their budget at that time was about 11 million, to get up to 9 or 10 million. When I left they had a 4.5 million dollars balance.

JM: Are you talking about state general fund money only then?

RJ: They don't get any general fund money.

JM: They did. But under your tenure—

RJ: We got rid of that. They still didn't get some EDIF [Economic Development Initiatives Fund], but we also absorbed tourism. So Wild Life and Parks was getting the same—when I left was getting the same amount of EDIF—it was EDIF, and it used to be general fund. They were getting the same amount that they got when I got there and absorbed tourism, which was getting about 2.5 million.

JM: So EDIF is the Economic Development Initiative Fund, which is lottery money and things like that. During your tenure there, you hit the budget problems. How did that affect you at Wildlife and Parks?

RJ: It really didn't. We did raise fees. We raised fees because they had not raised fees for a long time. When you're a fee agency—when you're relying on taxes, as the economy goes up, your tax revenue goes up. When you're relying on fees, the only way you can keep up is you have to adjust your fees. They had not adjusted their fees for a long time.

JM: By “fees,” you're talking about fishing licenses, hunting licenses, park fees.

RJ: Yes. As an example, we had over 2,500 people apply for nonresident deer permits that didn't get one. I told them, “Guys, if we've got 2,500 people that want a deer permit and

they're not getting one, we're not charging enough for a deer permit." So we increased our nonresident deer permits significantly, and we still had over 1,000 people.

JM: I don't think the average Kansas citizen understands how important that hunting industry is in the sense of people who come from out of state to hunt pheasant and deer and other things.

RJ: It's huge for the economy. It's also huge for Wildlife and Parks. I think 75 percent of our revenue comes from nonresidents. It's the nonresident deer that is the driver.

JM: So you look back at your tenure then and think that you put it on a better footing.

RJ: It was on a better footing, but that can go away so fast. You had this summer, which was devastating to those guys.

JM: Because of all the flooding.

RJ: All the flooding. If they're not able to get some FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] money, they may actually need a little bit of appropriations for the state of Kansas. I don't care who was there. This summer was going to be devastating for that agency.

JM: When I talked to Mike Hayden, you talked about rural Kansas and what could make a difference for rural Kansas going forward. You know this I'm sure already, but he's of a mind that we do far too little to promote the land in Kansas. Relative to the other states in the Plains, we have less public land. We just opened up a new park out in Little Jerusalem. He thinks there's a lot more that we could do to create ecotourism. What are your views on that?

RJ: I agree with that. There again, that's a problem with the legislature. They really got tough on letting us buy ground. I say us, wildlife parks and tourism. We had, for instance, now I forgot the name of it. It's down there between Wichita and Pratt, it's a great area to hunt. We had an opportunity to buy some ground that was right next to it.

JM: Sunshine and ?

RJ: No, that's over here, but at any rate, there are not a lot of opportunities for people to hunt unless you're hunting on private ground. It's getting tougher and tougher to get permission to hunt on private ground for two reasons. One, we don't have as many people living—people have moved to the city. The other is, there are a lot of farmers, and I don't blame them, that are leasing their ground out and actually making some money. If you're in agriculture, you need to make money just like everybody else. If it helps to lease your ground out to make money, they're going to do it. And it's robbing our society in Kansas of an opportunity for really something that's pretty wholesome. It's pretty basic, and it helps to control our wildlife resources.

We can't control the number of deer in Kansas. The only thing that people want to shoot are bucks. As long as we keep shooting bucks, we're going to continue to have this problem that you see grow every year until there's a major disease.

JM: I see it on the turnpike every time I travel back and forth from Topeka to Wichita.

RJ: Until there's a major disease in the deer, and we don't want that, they're just going to keep growing.

JM: We've covered a lot of ground. Is there anything I didn't ask about that you wanted to talk about?

RJ: I can't think of what it is. It's been fun.

JM: Yes, it's been a lot of fun.

RJ: Thank you.

JM: As we do with everyone we talk to, I want to thank you for your service to the state.

RJ: Thank you. It was fun, and I met a lot of great people.

JM: Good enough.

[End of File]

