INTERVIEW OF JOE KNOPP BY ALAN CONROY, 10-15-21
KANSAS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Alan Conroy: Good afternoon. The date is October 15, 2021 at 3:00 p.m., and we're in the House Chambers of the Kansas State House in Topeka, Kansas. I'm Alan Conroy, a forty-year-plus state employee with the majority of that time of state service working in the Kansas Legislative Research Department, the central nonpartisan research and budget staff for the legislature. I'm currently with the Kansas Public Employees Retirement System.

And today I have the privilege of visiting former House Majority Leader Joe Knopp who served eight years in the legislature. He first served in the 1981 legislature and serving the next four terms representing I think it was the 67th District, those whole eight years, composed of part of Riley County.

Joe Knopp: Right.

AC: So 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, and the interviews then will be made accessible for researchers, educators, and students. The interviews are funded in part by a grant from Humanities Kansas. I also need to thank Mary Galligan and the State Library here in the State House for their collective assistance to me in doing the research on Majority Leader Knopp in terms of preparation for the work for this interview. And the audio and video equipment today is being operated by former Speaker Pro Tem David Heinemann.

Majority Leader Knopp attended Kansas State University, where he was student body president. He earned a bachelor's degree in 1974 and then a law degree from Washburn and has been practicing in Manhattan since 1978. So had a good run. An interesting thing, for over fifteen years, you taught engineering law at Kansas State University, and you've also been past president of the solo and small firm section of the Kansas Bar Association. In addition, you serve on the Legislative Affairs Committee for the Bar Association.

In addition to his law practice, he's served [in] the legislature from 1981 to 1988. He served as chair of the Judiciary Committee, chairperson, there was a special committee on medical malpractice, I think which must have taken a lot of effort and of course was House majority leader for two years. He's been president of the Manhattan Chamber of Commerce, a member of the Manhattan Sunset Zoo Trustees, Friends of the McCain Auditorium, an advisor to Delta Upsilon Fraternity at K State and so brings lots of experiences to the discussion today.

So while he was in the House, he served on numerous committees, started out in Agriculture and Livestock, Elections I think five years there, Judiciary, vice chair starting in 1982 and then chairperson in '85 and '86, so a total of six years; Transportation, the Legislative Judicial and Congressional Apportionment Committee, and then as Leadership, Calendar and Printing, Interstate and Cooperation, all of those good committees.

So we'll just start out a little bit about your background and kind of how things started I guess before your life, before you entered the legislature. I believe you were born in Junction City, and you grew up on the family farm south of Chapman, far south, is it Woodbine or Hope?

JK: Correct.

AC: That neck of the woods?

JK: Three miles north of Woodbine. So I went to Woodbine for grade school, a little four-room grade school. I have a picture of my dad holding me on his shoulders while the Eisenhower dedication is taking place in the early fifties. Anybody who's grown up in Dickinson County thinks that any boy can grow up to do whatever they want to do. That's been kind of a part of our tradition and a thought process, but a wonderful time, a farm ethic and good background.

AC: Any desire to stay on the family farm? Had that thought crossed your mind?

JK: I tell people that there was a day when Dad and my uncle went in to talk to the lawyer while I was putting up hay for a neighbor. The neighbor was paying me a dollar an hour to take these bales up in the barn. Dad and my uncle came back from the lawyer, and they said he charged $20 an hour for his service. I said, "I think I like that thought process."

No, the farming was a good occasion. We had a small farm, three boys, and going into law and even politics at an early age, I had that thought process. That was a goal.

AC: In fact, one of my next questions then just in terms of when that interest in politics in general developed?

JK: In 1960, the Kennedy/Nixon race, and you read the stories of those campaigns and the great public policy issues that are out there that need to be resolved. That was an early interest. It just piqued my curiosity. So I always had that desire, if there's a group that is functioning, let's make it function better, and let's move it in the direction that it needs to do. So high school Student Council, lost by a vote; student body president at K State won probably handily. Anybody who's interested, you've got to realize it's a very fickle business. It's a good hobby. It should not be a profession. Anybody who's listening, you've got to be ready to go back and live with the folks that you represented and answer to them for the good things you did and the bad things you did, the opportunities you've taken, opportunities you missed, and you walk away.

AC: Is timing important in politics?

JK: Oh, it is. I think I got involved too early, really I do. When I talk to people now, I think it's good to have a maturity, good to have a sense of what's important in the world, how you can make a change for those important things. I think some of us who enjoyed the process and enjoyed the public policy were looking for political answers sometimes rather than the right answer, and we didn't have the right answer. So we were kind of listening to people around to figure out what the best solution from the people, the lobbyist or whoever were there. But I think that those who have come in later in life have a better sense of purpose and values.

AC: How old were you when you first got elected?

JK: In '80, I would have been twenty-eight. I would just share with you that in '86, I knew I was going to run for majority leader. But my law partner who had been a state senator, Donn Everett said, “Joe, it's time to come back.” So I went down the street. I went to Sam Brownback who was practicing law at another firm. I said, “Sam, get ready to run. I'm coming home.” He said, “Why don't you join us, and you can stay?” So I did. Three years later, he became secretary of agriculture. He started his career.

There have been a number of student body presidents in the legislature. David Miller was one. Vic Miller was one. Ed Rolfs was one in my era. So we have a sense of politics. We also have a sense of public policy. It's a good background, but I think I got started too early. I would have been a better leader, a better person governing.

AC: So you would have been a majority leader when you were about thirty-four.

JK: Thirty-four, thirty-five, yes. It's not extremely young, but it was a good time.

AC: And particularly in this institution when seniority sometimes—

JK: Not exactly true. That's what surprised me about coming here to the legislature was that I expected that it was going to be a twelve, fifteen, eighteen-year process. A lot of things happened to make the dominos move faster. I was lucky to have the timing right. To move from a freshman to a vice chair to a chair to majority leader, but other people have done it. And part of it is just having a lot of good friends and being in the right place at the right time.

I would say it's not like Congress. The Kansas legislature is not like Congress where you've got people who are here forty, sixty years and waiting and waiting and waiting. It's a much more fluid environment.

AC: Right. But still almost meteoric, I think in terms of being that freshman, vice chair, chair, majority leader, all within really just a few years. That maybe speaks well of your abilities, I think.

JK: Thank you. I think I was around good people, and a lot of good people support me. We had a cadre of people that met on Tuesday or Wednesday nights ostensibly to play cards, but all we did was kind of talk about what was going on and how these different policies affected, and that enabled me to get a lot of good insight. I think that's the thing I would encourage any legislator or when I talk to fraternity guys, get a set of mentors. Get a set of people around. Get as many ideas as you can and support as you can.

AC: Right. You've already maybe mentioned one, but just in terms of anybody you admired maybe growing up or either local, state, national politics? I guess you mentioned Dickinson.

JK: I had a great admiration for Donn Everett who was in the State Senate and the State House; Richard Seaton who was also a law partner of his, ran for attorney general against Vern Miller. I saw those guys. I admired them. I can't say that I had any other particular idol. I think my son who was student body president at KU thirty years after I was at K State has a picture of John Kennedy. I don't have a Kennedy or a Rockefeller or a Reagan poster anywhere. Those personal people affected me.

AC: So here it was 1980, and you decide you're going to run for the legislature, something, the timing or I guess some issue, somebody was talking to you?

JK: John Stites was the incumbent, and he had been here two years, and he said, "I want to go back home. I've done this now." So it was an open seat, and I was ambitious.

AC: Worked hard for it?

JK: Worked hard for it. My wife, we had a one-year old. My wife was out pushing the stroller with a little baby in the middle of the summer, sweat pouring down her. We worried that Family Services would get called for child abuse, but we worked hard and got elected, and it was a good experience.

AC: I saw you beat Dean Campbell with 66 percent of the vote in the primary.

JK: Dean was a businessman there, had the local Budweiser, maybe it was Coors. I can't remember. But a distributor, he was a businessman. But I had worked with, when I got out of college, I spent a summer working with John Peterson on his campaign for Congress. He eventually lost to Martha Keys, but I went back to law school in August, and I got him through the primary, but no.

AC: You won with 66 percent of the vote in the primary.

JK: It was good. And then in the general I had a lady who had been on the school board, remarkable.

AC: Barbara Withee?

JK: Barbara Withee. It was just a matter of being young and innocent. I just said, "Okay, I'm going to keep going. It was a Republican district at that time. Over time it's kind of moved a little more Democratic, but at that time it was a good deal.

AC: And you beat her with 60 percent of the vote.

JK: You have to tell me that. It was more than 1. That's all I needed.

AC: So in the race, the school board, any particular reason? Was it just the hard work?

JK: I think that as student body president, I had a little bit of recognition in the community for having done that. I think that that reflected on the people's judgment of my ability. As student body president, I got an ex officio seat on the Chamber of Commerce. So I felt like over that period of time, I got to know the community. And then practicing law for a couple of years added to that.

AC: A lot of door to door?

JK: An awful lot of that.

AC: Do you remember, did you spend much on that first campaign?

JK: I want to say it was about $3,000 or $4,000. It was all raised. We didn't have money to put into it ourselves, but we got friends to contribute. Ron Hein was a state senator here at that time. I had worked on his campaign when I was in law school. Ron was an afficionado about putting up the yard signs before yard signs were cool. So we kind of took that back. Every time I stopped at a door, I visited with somebody, “Oh, by the way, I'm going to be putting up yard signs in the last week of this campaign. Do you mind if I put one up?” They'd think about it. “Go ahead.”

So by the time the campaign rolled around and the election rolled around, I had a lot of yard signs before people were putting them up in Manhattan. I think that had an influence on it. It's like social media today. Whoever can come up with the technology and the newest way of reaching people and expressing opinions and showing support, they're going to have a good chance.

AC: You have a good color code or stars or a flag or anything.

JK: It was very simple.

AC: The next three elections, no primary opponent.

JK: No primary.

AC: So you must have been doing something right.

JK: Something right for the Republicans. I had general election opponents each time. That was the key thing.

AC: I was just looking here in the research. '82 was Diane Urban. You won 62 percent of the vote. Then '84, Nina Miley, 67 percent of the vote. Then in '86, you were unopposed, which must have been nice. Then of course in '88, Sheila Hochhauser.

JK: Right.

AC: I guess maybe the value of going door to door, is that what it took? Or at least certainly in this period.

JK: I think it had a great impact. Back in those days, the newspaper was much more widely circulated. More people bought it and subscribed to it. So that was an important part.

AC: Did you get an endorsement from the paper?

JK: They were always kind of lukewarm. “He's a good guy, but so is she.” At the end of the day, you kind of wondered whether you got an endorsement or not. It gave you a forum with the Letters to the Editor and other things, to do things right.

AC: So when you got elected in November of 1980, Reagan was president. Dole was re-elected. The Kansas Senate, the Republicans picked up three seats. They were at twenty-four. Then in the House, there was a net gain of three seats that brought it to seventy-two Republicans for that very first session. So here you rolled in from Manhattan. Of course, John Carlin, a Democrat, was governor. Wendell Lady was speaker. Ben Foster was speaker pro tem, Robert Frey was majority leader, and Fred Weaver was the minority leader.

I always like doing this, just getting out the House journal from in that case 1981 and just looking down the names of the crowd of people that you served with—Denny Apt, Marvin Barkis, Bill Bunton, Rochelle Chronister, Sandy Duncan, Keith Farrar, Mike Hayden, David Heinemann, Jim Lowther, David Miller, Robert H. Miller, Ed Rolfs, John Solbach, George Teagarden, Neal Whitaker, Eric Yost. A wide variety of people.

JK: You've named all the All Stars that I viewed as All Stars. These were remarkable people. Denny Apt, Rochelle Chronister, I can think of others. They were great people to watch. What you need to understand is, when you're first elected, you've got to select that leadership you talked about. So in December we come in. You're elected in November. You have a leadership race. I didn't have a clue. I thought that was just a party. I can skip that party, and I'll come and vote. Well, that night is when they're out talking to people. So the bottom line was that Bob Arbuthnot who lived thirty miles northwest of us had come by and said, “Joe, I'd like to have your support. Can I have your support?” and I said, “Well, you're close. Who are you running against?” “Well, Wendell Lady, he's in Johnson County.” “Okay, you're close enough. I'll support you.” Then he says, “Will you second my nomination?” “Well, all right. I'll do that. Why not?” Little did I know. Wendell carried the day significantly.

I think at that time it was kind of an urban/rural conflict there. He [Wendell Lady] carried the day heavily. Little did I know that that might affect committee assignments. Thank goodness I was happy with everything. Judiciary was appropriate. Transportation was good. Ag was good. I'm a farm boy. That's good. So that was a good deal.

AC: Elections. Was that one in that first?

JK: Elections might have been one, too. I forgot the important Elections Committee.

AC: But landing a seat on Judiciary certainly and Ag, too.

JK: You needed lawyers, and I was a lawyer. So that fit. I'll never forget, I walked into Ag Committee one day. Chairman [Bill] Beezley is there. We've got a hearing on people who want processed cheese or some dairy product that they had to drive to Oklahoma to get because the dairy people here didn't want it. We were sitting around the table, and Bill had the hearing. After the hearing was closed, I said, “Mr. Chairman, I move that we pass this on for approval. It sounds like a good idea.” He said, “You're out of order. We're going to take that up later.” It never came up again. I don't know whether he was a dairy farmer or just—I learned quickly that things just don't happen the way you think they're going to happen.

AC: Another question I usually always ask is do you remember the first time you came down to the well and carried a bill here on the House floor? You went to the well.

JK: My problem is that I was a little vociferous. I wasn't hesitant about expressing my opinion on some things. I tried to reserve it to things that I thought would count. I can't come back and tell you the first time. All I know is that the standard was for somebody to come down carrying an innocuous bill, thinking it meant nothing, and then to have the board light up in the back with everybody having questions and the person turning around, going, “Wait a minute. I'm not prepared for any questions, let alone all these questions.” Then they quickly turn their lights off and have a little laugh, and that would be it.

AC: I noticed the first bill that had your name on it happened to be House Bill 2374, which prohibited student fees for debt service on certain buildings at Regents institutions without a student referendum.

JK: That goes back to student body president days.

AC: Still an open sore there, maybe?

JK: The open sore to me is how easily students pass all these referendums thinking they're going to pass all the costs on to everybody else who comes on. It's like passing a sales tax in a community where everybody moves out of the community in a couple of years, and it's easy to pass.

AC: So we did some research and counted. It looked like over the years you sponsored sixty-four bills, resolutions that had your name on it in some manner. Of course, there were some maybe kind of standard things—honored Colonel Joe Engle for being the command pilot on the spaceship Columbia.

JK: A Chapman High graduate.

AC: Yes. Honoring Jean Riggs on her retirement from KSU.

JK: Food service.

AC: Congratulating Fred Weaver on his legislative service, honoring Joe Snell on his retirement from the Historical Society, and you even had one honoring the KU men's basketball program and Larry Brown on winning the 1988 NCAA basketball championship.

JK: We try to be ecumenical.

AC: And then of course there were a few urging the US Congress to do something or not to do something. One was on delaying an increase in compensation of members of Congress.

JK: The bill that I worked the hardest on my first year here involved a cult bill. I had an engineering professor whose daughter had been kind of, not coerced but seduced into a cult. He was having trouble getting her out of that. We spent a lot of time—Joe Hoagland was chairman of the Judiciary Committee. It kind of caught his fancy, and we got it through the House, only to have it die in the Senate with Elwaine Pomeroy saying, “I don't think this is that important, and it has some consequences.” But that taught me early on, there's two houses. It also gave me an opportunity to kind of advocate for a particular issue that a lot of people really hadn't thought of before. It was a good experience.

AC: Just some of the other bills, agricultural corporations, businesses may own land reasonably necessary to conduct their business. That was in the early eighties.

JK: The other thing about that, here's a lawyer on the Judiciary Committee, and you've got corporate farming coming into the state. Hog farms, dairy farms, cattle, and the question for a lawyer is, “What difference does it make if four people have a partnership or they form a corporation and sell stock to each other or they sell stock to their kids or they sell stock to their neighbors?” Well, to a farmer who's not paying enough attention says, “That sounds like IBM and General Motors. I don't want them owning farmland.” So it was a very contentious issue back in those days, and it slowly took time to do that. I found myself kind of trying to explain how to do that.

There is a saying in politics, “If you can't explain it in thirty seconds and have people convinced you're right, you're on the wrong side of the issue.” Talking in favor of corporate hog farming, it's hard to come back in thirty seconds as to why it's not bad. Everybody feels like “This is my last chance to have a family farm.”

AC: So that thirty-second viewpoint, did that serve you well through the years?

JK: No. I don't want to talk in terms of slogans, but somebody told me that there are simple answers to complex problems, and they're all wrong. I think for anybody thinking about the legislature and the role of lobbyists is to help people understand both sides. The medical malpractice issue: for every trial lawyer who was concerned about getting the maximum recovery for an injured child or an injured family from a medical claim, there's also a doctor who can't afford the medical malpractice premiums that affect his ability to serve a community. So figuring out how to bring those two things together was a major task. That's one of the things I'm probably most proud of my career is serving on that committee and having the opportunity to bring the insurance industry that's insuring these doctors and the trial lawyers who are anxious to protect their rights and reimburse injured people and the medical community who says, "I can't afford to deliver babies if I'm paying $100,000 a year in premiums" and that process.

We spent a summer doing that and came up with some, I thought, good ideas, and they passed. Whether it was a cause of that or something else, the problem went away in Kansas and across the nation. But at one time, it was really threatening the delivery of health care in rural areas and urban areas across the state, just because there's not enough doctors to pay for all those million-dollar losses.

AC: An intense summer then on that malpractice committee?

JK: It was good. I went down and had lunch with a prominent personal injury attorney in Wichita who was probably responsible for the crisis because he was having such good success in nicking bad doctors who were doing bad things. We sat at lunch. I asked him pointed questions. I said, "Tell me, what's pain and suffering really worth? What's the difference between pain and suffering from half a million and a million, two million?" The actual dollar losses in medical care, you can count that. It's that million, five million, ten million dollars in pain and suffering. He said, "Well, that's what a jury says that's worth. That's what it is." I said, "Well, I think that's causing problems. As a matter of public policy, we've got to put a cap on that in my opinion." He said, "Well, you do it, and we'll see if you're re-elected. You do it, and if we're ever in court together, I'll make sure I beat you." I said, "If we're in court together, I would hope you would because I don't want you to give me any favors."

The trial lawyers were very active in my '88 election. Kathleen Sebelius as head of the Kansas Trial Lawyers, they were very helpful to my opponent, financially, whatever. I did some self-inflicted things there that I'm not blaming that. I'm proud of that record, and I'm proud that they had their position, and I had mine.

AC: Certainly taking on that issue, when you think of the big lobbying groups or the big—those groups that maybe have a lot of sway, whether it's trial lawyers, whether it's the medical profession.

JK: The Chamber of Commerce.

AC: Some big players, let's say.

JK: Well, they have a lot of members across the state, and they represent important interests that people care about.

AC: Some of the other bills that your name was on, again quite a range. Admissibility of refusal to submit a blood test upon arrest for driving while under the influence. Evaluation of property of public utilities for rate-making purposes. Sort of a standard one through the years. A constitutional amendment affecting the—this was in '83, '84—authority and method of selection of members of the State Board of Education, the whole State Board of Education issue which has been considered several times through the years, statewide reappraisal of property, limiting taxing subdivisions. Some exemptions, property tax for property of new manufacturing businesses. A constitutional amendment providing for the amendment to the constitution for the state initiated by qualified electors of the state. Of course, that did not pass. Do you still think that would be a good thing to have as part of our constitution?

JK: The times have changed so much. All of these things have got to be viewed in the perspective of the times that they were considered. Don't hold me to a position that I might have had forty years ago.

AC: It's been a few years ago, yes. That's fair.

JK: Isn't that amazing? Forty years. This was forty-two, forty-three years ago. I'm only fifty-two.

AC: And think of all the wisdom you've gotten over those years. Mandatory life imprisonment for certain crimes. Reducing general fund transfers to the State Highway Fund. Training program and exams for municipal judges, those kinds of things.

JK: You think back on that. The death penalty at that time was a major issue that we dealt with and had some very—the medical malpractice debate was a significant one. The death penalty debate is one that takes you to your core values, trying to figure out where that issue is. Those are the kind of issues that I think go beyond partisan. They really go to your core value. Where do you stand? What can you live with for the next fifty years when you vote on something like that?

&I think by and large the people who are up here, I'll say all of them, very conscientious, very dedicated to doing what's right in their mind. That was my perception at that time. I've got a composite of all the legislators. I can look at each one of those names, and I know if I had a flat tire within twenty miles, any one of them would come and pick me up as would I for them. It's that kind of camaraderie, whether you're a D or an R. I wish that I had spent more time in the last forty years wanting to keep up those relationships. Annually we have a fish fry here, and I don't come to those as much as I should. They are great people.

AC: You mentioned about tough issues and all of that. Another question is kind of that philosophical kind of governmental thing, do you vote your conscience, your beliefs, or do you vote your constituents', your district, whatever the issue may be?

JK: One of the things I think ended up resulting in the community saying I ought to come back and let somebody else hold my position was we had some votes. We were in the middle of we thought was a tight budget session. As the majority leader, I'm sitting up here saying, “We're going to hold the line” and telling a lot of people, “We're going to hold the line.” At that time, we had about a 67, whatever it would be, a 67-60 majority. You could only lose three people, and you wouldn't prevail if the Democrats held their position.

So there were a lot of votes that I was leading and saying, “Hold tight on this one. Even though you think it might be good to spend another $10,000 on that, let's hold the line.” Here comes an amendment from the Democrats saying, “Let's add $50,000 to a program at K State.” So I'm saying, “Wait a minute. Our goal is to hold the line,” and part of that goal was to fund faculty salaries that had already been approved at a much higher level than I thought we could get it done. Through our efforts, we got more faculty salaries. So I felt the need to say no to these things just to be consistent.

Well, that vote became a key vote in the advertisements against me. “He doesn't represent us.” I tried to explain why and the big picture, having a majority leader from Manhattan was good for K State and having a Democrat who's sitting in the back of the room is not good for K State, but they weren't willing to buy that. I think anybody who doesn't understand their constituency and thinks they're smarter than their constituency is in trouble. Again, if you can't explain it in thirty seconds, you're in a difficult position.

AC: Yes. Just some of the other issues, affiliate with Washburn?

JK: Back in those days, Washburn Municipal got a direct appropriation from the state. If you were Bill Bunton and chairman of the House Appropriations, Ways and Means Committee, that's pretty good or could be pretty good. Bill was always very fair to all the region schools.

The decision started coming down. Should we have Washburn under control of the Board of Regents? My thought was yes. The key word is “control.” To Manhattan, we've got six kids in the family, and we can't afford that. Why are we adopting another one? So that became another issue. Again, that was the deal.

We took up reapportionment that year. The issue was “Do you count students where they reside or where they live at home?” We've got 20,000 students who have residences in Seward County and Johnson County. Any count increases our population and our representation.

AC: Sure.

JK: The problem with that was that it required a state census that was hundreds of thousands of dollars to conduct. Whether you've got two representatives from Manhattan or 2.1 representatives probably isn't as important as who they are. So my view as a conservative fiscal person was I think that's a waste of money, and I don't think it's—well, once again, "You're not representing Manhattan."

I've named about three. That goes back to the duties of leadership. and trying to convince your community that on balance, you're better for your community than—but that's assuming I'm smarter than they are. That is not something you should assume.

AC: So you did have some tough budget years during your time.

JK: Well, kind of. You've got to remember that in 1980, '81, '82, John Carlin had come up with a new revenue source. He was going to tax the oil and gas industry through the severance tax.

AC: Yes.

JK: That immediately divided this room, not north and south, although the north was Democrat and the South Republican, but it divided them east and west, if you lived in southeast Kansas and western Kansas. It was really viewed as a money grab to get their wealth, which it kind of was. And I'm living in a community that needs all the state income it can get. So I fall on the pro-severance tax side even though it's a Democratic governor supporting it, as does Wendell Lady. Ross Doyen is the president of the Senate. Ross is on the other side. So we have a major conflict, and one year we just adjourned and walked out. "Okay, we can't solve this. We're just leaving."

I remember in the middle of that discussion, Manhattan was having a conflict with Junction City on whether Junction City and Geary County could annex Fort Riley. And by annexing Fort Riley, they would pick up 15,000 soldiers into their vote, whereas right now they were—the line through Fort Riley had a lot of military housing in Riley County. And Senator Wertz was from Geary County, and Ivan Sand was chairman of Local Government.

We were adamantly opposed to it, and then I kind of got a call or a message from the senator from Cloud saying if you want to have that vote on annexation held up, then your vote on the severance tax needs to be different than it has been. So I get my indignation up, and I go down to the floor, and I write a report saying "I'm voting this way, but I'm doing it under duress." Well, that creates a little bit of a brou-ha-ha. I was overdramatic and didn't need to be. I felt like I was more important than I was. Those are the kinds of little things that can happen in the legislature that you're trying to balance. I don't fault anybody from using any leverage that they can use, and if I were speaker or whatever, I would probably try to suggest those things to my members, too.

AC: Just in terms of leadership, you talked about that, but when you were in the House here, speakers, minority leaders, Wendell Lady, Fred Weaver, Mike Hayden, Marvin Barkis, and then [Jim] Braden. Marvin Barkis was minority leader. That's when you were majority leader.

So your relationships with the speakers through the years. Clearly you and Braden got along very well most of the time?

JK: Very good. And Mike Hayden as speaker was very generous in allowing me to be the chairman of the Judiciary Committee and allowing me to be chairman of the Malpractice Committee. We formed a joint committee between the House and the Senate, and I took over chairmanship of that joint committee. That was an important thing, and I felt very reaffirmed that they instilled that confidence in me. So Mike was very supportive, and we supported him and his efforts. When he was elected governor the following year, you had Mike Hayden in the governor's chair, and then you have Braden, myself, and [Senator] Bob Talkington and [Senator Bud] Burke, and to sit around a table in the Governor's Office talking about agenda and strategy is a heady experience. It's one that gives me insight into government that I would have never had any other way. You can talk about income, and then you can talk about psychic income. To have had that experience, I wouldn't trade a million dollars for it.

AC: Right.

JK: Now can I spend it? No. It was a great experience. Making public policy is why you go through the—and I enjoy going door to door and meeting people, too. It's taking time away from your family. It's taking time away from your work, and it's doing that.

AC: Certainly some of those qualities of leadership that maybe you saw in whether it was Braden or Hayden or so forth, Wendell Lady.

JK: I think the key is communicating clearly what you want and being up front with people on why you think it's important. I felt like when we were a majority leader and Braden was speaker, we'd have a Republican caucus, and we'd try to be as clear as we could be on the agenda. I would tell you that back in those days, we ran budgets. We ran the transportation budget. We ran the school district budget We ran the Regent's budget, and we would talk about the merits of that particular budget.

This process has gone into where we're all or nothing. As the legislative session ends, the power gravitates towards that office and that office and the Governor's Office. They're making decisions with their committee chairman that the rank and file have no control over. And I don't think it leads to good decisions. I think what we did before on the merits of each one did a better, more conscientious evaluation of them than they do now. Now I haven't been up here. I haven't sat in on any of this. Maybe they have the same outcome as we did by putting it all in one pot, but I just have to think that that was a terrible evolution of the process in my opinion.

AC: It's certainly a change. Just doing some research, one of the things I reviewed was the history of the state Republican Party. It talks about particularly in the nineties, a conservative insurgency within the Republican Party, but in the article, it talked really about—the first part was on kind of financial, and then later on it was financial and social issues.

But in '87, it talked about a Republican Reform Caucus, twelve legislators made up of, I guess, around the umbrella of fiscal constraint—David Miller, Kerry Patrick, Gayle Mollenkamp, Susan Wagle.

JK: Tim Shallenburger.

AC: Tim Shallenburger. This was, you're majority leader, and you had this subgroup I guess within the caucus.

JK: Just throwing grenades. Throwing grenades as quick as they could. Bless their hearts. David Miller was student body president at KU. A good guy. Kerry Patrick was my roommate at K State in Delta Upsilon fraternity. All these guys are good guys. In fact, probably they were ahead of their time, obviously. The Tea Party, all of those, and historically the House has had those people. I mean, Mike Hayden would talk about sitting in the back row and being outside of the Wendell Lady group at one point and then kind of working his way in. So the back row has always been kind of viewed as we're going back there to throw spit wads.

So I don't fault them, but they truly were the beginnings of that conservative movement that happened. When we were here, there was a lot of balance. I want to say sixty-seven Republicans and maybe fifty-eight Democrats—123 --whatever the number is[1]. I think we had good policy coming out of that, and we had good discussions, and I have friends who irritated me on the other side, but we'd laugh and go out and go to the Chamber of Commerce reception, the bankers reception, or whoever's reception that night and see our constituents and always run into each other and share a story from the day.

I think that was good. We've gotten extremely focused in our issues now. It's hard to get past the rhetoric of that. Again, part of that is being able to convince the public back home that it's better to find a compromise than it is to stand on principle and lose or whatever.

AC: Did the Democrats in that time take advantage, capitalize maybe on that little—

JK: Oh, sure. Those twelve plus their fifty-three got them into the sixty-four, the sixty-three votes. But the problem the twelve had was that they didn't like to be associated with liberals. It was more or less that, too. It kind of complicated things. Those were all good people, highly principled. They were doing it because they felt strongly that what they were doing was right.

[1] *There are 125 legislators in the House.*

Today I would probably identify more with some of the things they were saying then than I did then. It's interesting, when you talk about the Party. I felt like I was a conservative Republican then, and I think I got more conservative, but my party has moved even further away from me, and I'm trying to decide where on the liberal-moderate-conservative spectrum I am. I would share with you that all of my friends, many of my friends in the legislature in the last two elections have not supported my Republican candidates that I'm supporting.

Wint Winter, loved him, he's a dear friend. I respect his judgment. Rochelle Chronister, respect her judgment. Tom Moxley, all these people who I respect have somehow migrated to the left of me. It's disconcerting because I have so much respect for them. Maybe they're so close that they know more than I do, and I'm just sitting back at home drawing vague generalities.

AC: Did I read somewhere at one point that maybe you identified with the Tea Party?

JK: I would say that as time went on, I've become more—that goes back to maturity. I feel like I've become a lot more fiscally conservative because I've been paying for all of this for forty years. Back when I was twenty-five, thirty-eight, I didn't have a lot of money, but I wasn't paying a lot. So the idea of having more programs that are funded by everybody to benefit everybody made a lot of political sense to me. It fed a political philosophy. As I've grown up, I see some of the things, 330 million dollars for this building. Could we have done it for 280? And we thought we were going to get it done for a lot less than that, and I know how remodeling costs go up. It's those kinds of things. We can nitpick things that are sores that people are not really proud of but had to be done, and we shouldn't do that.

AC: Maybe most difficult issue during your time in the legislature? Was it the medical malpractice? Was it budget? Was it school finance? Taxes?

JK: Yes.

AC: All the above?

JK: School finance was always a problem because it boiled down to Dale Dennis and the budget department over at the Department of Education coming in with a print-out, and each print-out said what 308 districts would do. Did this one help me, or did that one help me? It always tended to be a rural/urban situation. So it wasn't necessarily Republican and Democrat, but inevitably in the old days, when the last bill that came up was the bill to appropriate, and there would always be a bill to adjust some minor appropriation that needed to be done at the last minute, which then made every appropriation amendment germane, Democrats would come down with a 50 million dollars, “Let's fund education for teachers and kids.” And you say, “Wait a minute. We've been all through that. We don't have the money. Let's don't do it.”

So we've got to come up with sixty-three votes. Well, we've got some people who don't do that. I remember one particularly tough time we were going through in Speaker Braden's office. We were counting votes and figuring out how we could do it. We had a couple of people always

voting with more money. And we said, and we were getting pressure from the twelve in the back, “Why are we having to hold the vote if they don't?”

We had a vice chairman of the Education Committee who had strong views. We said, “Well, there's got to be consequences for not voting for this.” The speaker took her off of her vice chairmanship. The next day, there was a six-dozen rose bouquet on her desk from the Democrats saying, “We applaud you for your courage,” and all of us felt bad. In retrospect, I wish we hadn't have done that. Elizabeth Baker was a good person and had strong views and just recently passed.

But it's those stories, it's those things that you look back on and you say, “Doggone it, could we have done something different?” But at the time, you've got to figure out how to hold the team together.

AC: That's part of leadership.

JK: That's part of leadership. Making tough decisions.

AC: And speaking of that, you already mentioned one. So when you were in the legislature, again on the Senate side, Ross Doyen [Senate President], Bob Talkington, [Senate President] Bud Burke was majority leader then.

JK: Right.

AC: While you were House majority leader. Particularly I guess, when you were the majority leader working with the Senate—

JK: It worked well. We had a good working relationship. The Wendell Lady/Ross Doyen relationship was not good, but the Bob Talkington/Jim Braden relationship was good. We had Mike Hayden in the governor's chair. We had good conversations and things.

In 1987, Mike Hayden wanted to have a special session for highways. He had it in his mind that we were going to bring these people back, and they will vote for this because it's a good thing. We spent four days or a week up here trying to get that done. I got in a plane with Mike. We flew down in the governor's plane, flew down to southeast Kansas and talked about the benefits of bringing roads down there that were going to happen. I remember taking my ten-year-old daughter along and paying $162 for a plane ticket. It was interesting. Anyway, that legislative session was tough.

AC: Did you advise him against calling a special session? I don't know whether he checked with anybody.

JK: He didn't ask me, but I thought it was a good idea. I think that he called attention to a problem that existed. There were roads and highways in Kansas that really needed it and

bonding at that time made sense. And a part of the problem was at that time, the Highway Fund, K-12 education, higher education-- were all competing for scarce funds.

AC: Right.

JK: My priority was higher education.

AC: Sure.

JK: So to get the Highway Fund on a self-perpetuating fund, they're not competing for general funds here made an awful lot of sense to me and the roads needed and the economic development needed, all those reasons. But we just couldn't convince Marvin Barkis and the Democrats that that was the time to do it.

I think that issue, some of the social issues led to the decline of the Democratic Party in the House. Marvin was speaker of the House. He lost a couple of his colleagues who either became Republicans or lost seats down in southeast Kansas, and then the social issues came along—the abortion issue, the other issues, but that was the high point. If you look at the high point, that was about it. And then ever since then, today I don't know how you—we've got three parties. I don't know how they function.

AC: That middle ground isn't there today?

JK: I don't know. There's too much rhetoric and not enough conversation in my opinion. But that's—the people who were effective at getting rhetoric out are getting elected. So I'm not going to argue against success.

AC: When you ran for majority leader, of course, you have this meeting and people vote. I suppose you probably counted the votes and recounted the votes before the actual casting the ballots?

JK: That's an interesting process. We talked about it. Again, I mentioned two years—in '86, when I ran for re-election, in my life, my law partner was Donn Everett, and he said, “Joe, I want you to come back and quit the legislature.” I said, “Well, Donn, I'm kind of getting ready to run for majority leader, and I'd like to think I could be speaker someday. That's what I'd kind of like to do. Give me a chance.” “Well, no, I want you to do that.” I said, “Well, all right.”

I walked down the street to another law firm and talked to another young lawyer by the name of Sam Brownback. I said, “Sam, get ready to run. I'm getting ready to retire,” and he said, “Well, I've got a partner down here that just died of cancer a couple of years ago. We've got a vacant office. Why don't you come down and join us?” So I did. So I ran.

Well, running for legislative leadership is not as simple as you'd think. It's not quite the same as just going around and saying, “Hey, Harold, Mr. Guldner, would you support me?” and Harold

says, “Let me think about it. Why don't you come out and visit me?” I said, “Well, Harold, Syracuse is a long way away. I come here all the time.”

AC: Roads go both ways.

JK: “You could come and visit me.” So I spent the summer and fall going out and visiting people in their homes in their home districts driving around their elevators and helping campaign for them. Well, my opponent's at home, working hard against me. I was successful. Well, that's not quite true. I was unopposed at that time.

AC: That was in '86.

JK: I was unopposed. I was helping people in '88, when I should have been home. But in '86, I went around. And when somebody says, “I'll think about it,” you kind of say, “Now, is that a yes or is that a no?” You have your friends who are helping you on this, and they're coming up with these lists. At the end of the day, I thought I had a four-vote majority.

AC: Were you surprised at the actual vote?

JK: The first vote comes out, and it's a tie, and there are three people who have voted for Ben Foster who is from Wichita. Ben was wanting to be majority leader, and he and Burr Sifers from Overland Park or Mission Hills were the three votes. So it's tied. Bob Vancrum and I are good friends, and he and I are running.

The second ballot comes in 2:1. So I win by one vote.

AC: One vote.

JK: So I go back and I think, “Who are the three that I thought I had?” I remember one lady from Wichita I thought I had. She said, “Well, I didn't vote for you.” She said, “You didn't come and talk to me.” I said, “Well, I thought I'd been good friends, and we had been on the same side all along.” She said, “You didn't come down to talk to me. The other guy did.” So it all goes back to it's personal. It all goes back to respecting that person's self-worth and going in to talk to them in their home district.

It makes leadership so much more effective. I can say to Harold, “Harold, I know where you live. I know the issues. This issue isn't important to your community. Can I have your vote on this issue, and then we'll try to figure out something that's important for Farm Bureau or for somebody else back there.” I think that gives you a good perspective. You've got to go to all 105 counties. You've got to go to every precinct in Johnson County. I think those are the things that make a difference.

AC: Medical malpractice, the biggest success maybe in terms of—maybe it's not fair to name one.

JK: That's the one I had the most personal involvement with that now. I take credit for all the good things that happened.

AC: There's quite a few. I've got a list over those years.

JK: There's good things that happened. I look back at early on, John Carlin as governor to his credit took on severance tax, took on liquor by the drink, took on some things. And my mother is WCTU. We don't drink. So for me to vote for liquor by the drink, not good. My local Kwik Shop is wanting to sell beer where you're selling gas. That doesn't make sense. It kind of does. Gambling. He took on gambling. We went to a parimutuel at that time, the racetracks. We're going to beat out Ak Sar Ben[2] because they're making a lot of money. We're going to have two racetracks and greyhound tracks and a lottery. I'm adamantly opposed to gambling, but my K State vet said that a lot of vets are needed for horses to do horses and dogs, and there's a lot of dogs that are raced in Dickinson County, and Wichita needs a track. Anthony needs a track. So I found myself kind of saying, "Okay. We'll go with parimutuel. I won't go with lottery, but I'll go with parimutuel."

And then the death penalty. There's just a lot of votes that happened in those times that test your fundamental core. What do you believe in? What's best for our community? And I tried not to assert my morals on everybody else. If somebody said, "Lottery is just a form of entertainment. What's the difference between going to a K State football game and spending twenty dollars or going to the local Kwik Shop and believing you're a millionaire for a week and what you're going to do with your winning?" So I would walk away saying, "Okay, maybe that's a better way to look at it."

AC: All of those constitutional amendments. And they all passed except the Board of Education one.

JK: It was an interesting time.

AC: Biggest disappointment in terms of a policy issue that you thought maybe or were getting close and maybe get it across and the timing wasn't right?

JK: I'm a great believer in the wisdom of the crowd. I'm a great believer that if a majority of the people here don't think it's good, then who am I to say that it's not good?

AC: Right.

JK: I'm kind of willing to take the jury's verdict and think, "Okay, we've presented the best case we could. It didn't go over. Let's see how time will tell. If it's a good issue, we'll come back. If it's bad"—it's kind of like my cult thing. I thought the cult thing was a good thing. We ought to be

[2] A racetrack in Nebraska with parimutuel betting which attracts many Kansans.

able to go in and save somebody from the Jonestown catastrophe, and yet people said, “Well, there are civil liberties involved here, and people are adults.”

Anyway, my point is I'm a lawyer. I'm willing to let the wisdom of a jury, the wisdom of this body govern the outcome, and I'll live to fight another day. I'm not going to be mad at you for voting that way because we'll decide in a couple of years whether we needed a road to Paola or we needed a road to wherever. Now the problem is that they took that one bond issue, and they started saying, “That was good. Let's do more, more, more.” “How are we going to pay for it?” “I don't know. And we'll spend the money from there on something else.” No. Anyway, sometimes good things lead to bad precedent.

AC: I noticed again, just looking through the clips and they're just that of course, that you thought maybe at one point about attorney general might be of some interest to you.

JK: Once again, I was a young, ambitious guy who thought he could do a lot of things. I would share with you that I wasn't—Bill Clinton could run for attorney general at whatever age he did, and I don't know what he did as attorney general other than win. I remember going around to various leaders, and I thought at the end of the day, they would get in the room and they would pick up a crown and say, “You are the one. We've talked to everybody, and you are the one.” No. If you wanted something, you'd go out—Mike Hayden went out and he said, “I want to be governor,” and he went around and became governor. Alf Landon helped him.

AC: Sure.

JK: But that's not the way it was. I would say the other thing was that, as I did that, I remember talking to a good person in Wichita, and they said, “How do you feel about the death penalty?” and I said, “I have some real concerns about it being applied to felony murder rules. I don't want a kid who's in a car, and a guy shoots a liquor store to go to the death penalty.” He said, “That's not a good answer. If you're attorney general, you've got to be prepared to make tough decisions, and the people want the death penalty.” I said, “Well, I can't support that kind of bill,” but the fact again, in thirty seconds, I couldn't convince him I was right and he was wrong. He told me I was on the wrong side of that issue, and I probably would not have [had] the kind of gravitas to be an attorney general that the State needed at that time.

Again, had I been fifteen years older in the same position, I would have had more gravitas. There's a young man out in western Kansas by the name of Garrett Love who was elected to the House. Two years later, he was elected to the Senate. Boom, boom, boom, boom. And then he had the good judgment to walk away. I've talked to him since then. We've shared experiences. He said, “I need to have some maturity before I get back into politics.” I think he was right.

The problem with politics is that there are two good times to be in it, when you're very young and when you're very old. When you're very young, the opportunity cost is so low. You're not making any money anywhere else, and as a lawyer, you can't—the only two or three people that go door to door are Jehovah's Witnesses and lawyers and politicians. So I can go door to

door and meet people and advertise. The old lawyers say that the best thing to do is run for county attorney and lose.

The point I'm making about that is that young lawyers can be good, but then in your middle ages, when you need to be producing the most income, you can't afford to be down here ninety days. Then for me, I couldn't, when I was not in session, I was always thinking about it. What are we going to do on this? What should we do on that? How can we do that? So my mind wasn't completely on my job even when I was there.

It's hard to be thirty-five to fifty-five when you really are most effective to serve the legislature. When you're sixty to seventy-five is a good time to be in the legislature—wisdom, time. When people ask, “Where are these middle people in the legislature?” they're home working.

AC: That's right. I did notice, of course, in 2012, redistricting, reapportionment.

JK: Yes.

AC: Of course, the clock was very short, but you ran for the Senate.

JK: The State Senate, right. I was convinced that I could bring back the eighties. And Ed Bideau, he was down in Chanute running. Dave Heinemann here was running. There were other people who were trying to bring us back to sanity.

AC: Back to that middle.

JK: Back to the middle ground, where we talked with these people. I happened to be running against a very good conservative candidate, and the incumbent decided, Dr. Reitz decided to stay.

AC: And Bob Reeder

JK: Bob Reeder was that. I think I came in third, but it was like 35, 34, 32.

AC: You and Senator Reitz.

JK: But the point is, had there just been two, I would have gotten all of Roger Reitz's support. Had Bob Reeder not run, I would have gotten all of Bob Reeder's support. But because—they always say, “If you're in the middle of the road, you get hit by traffic going both ways.” So that was an interesting time.

AC: So Tom Hawk then—

JK: Tom Hawk won the general, and our community has become more Democratic. Tom has been there ever since. And Tom is a fraternity brother. I mean, in a small town, you can't be

that angry. These are all your friends. When the day is done, you're going to have coffee with them, and you're going to see them at church or whatever. So don't say anything bad.

AC: I mentioned there's one standard question we have to ask everybody, and it's on personal identity, and I'm going to read through it, and it's just one of the things that we ask all the people that are being interviewed: Personal identity is loosely defined as gender, age, race, class, sexual or gender orientation, marital status. Did you experience times during your time in the legislature where you believe your personal identity influenced your ability to pass policy, work with fellow legislators, or provide constituent services? Do you think you were ever given committee assignments or tasks that you believe were functions of your personal identity?

JK: I can't separate my personal identity from all of those characteristics. I was pretty confident. I'd been elected by 16,000 students who were my peers at Kansas State. I had spent a year hobnobbing with the top leaders and having lunch with Governor Docking and all of these things that they fluff the student leaders with. So I had a lot of confidence, and I think that confidence allowed me to speak with confidence. So I don't know whether it was because of my race or gender or whatever. I just was on a roll. It was part of that.

I look back on it, and I have so much great admiration for the women that were serving in our legislature. Joan Wagnon on the Democratic side, Rochelle Chronister on the Republican side, Denny Apt was chairman of the House Education Committee, Elizabeth Baker was vice chairman. I'm sure I'm missing—Wanda Fuller from Wichita was a good friend, a well-respected person on Ways and Means Committee. I could just go down the list.

We had fun with Theo Cribbs, a Democrat from Wichita who was Black. He enjoyed the role that he played as chairman of the Apple Committee. But we respected his views. I think everybody in this room, and they were representing a group of people, and I always—this goes back to my naivete or maybe my inability to recognize these problems, but I always felt like Rochelle Chronister could have been speaker, could have been governor. I viewed her the same way I viewed anybody else who was aspiring to go through John Carlin's chair to the governorship.

I remember going to the League of Women Voters and making the comment that I felt like a lot of women allowed themselves to be underappreciated because they tethered themselves in some way. My wife gave me a hard time. “Don't you ever say that again. Don't you ever say that again,” and she was right. But I think we all do that to ourselves.

The toughest thing for people who lose elections is to get up in the morning and say, “I'm not a failure. Today people thought somebody else was better. I'm still the same person I was two weeks ago, and I'm going to work to make my community better and get up and dust off.” Becoming the president of the Chamber helped doing that and other things, but I think that's the untethering we all have to do of things that control us.

AC: Would you ever see yourself returning to elected office, whether legislature or some other capacity?

JK: I made that run in '12. At that time, I was saying, “Okay, think about this. Four years, eight years,” and again I'm egotistical. “Four years, I'll do something. In eight years, I'll be Senate president.” Well, I don't want to spend twelve years at seventy doing something, and I'm not going to go just to push a button. If I want to go, I want to have an impact and an influence, and the way to do that is by assuming leadership.

So while I may think I'm fifty-three, I'm really sixty-nine. The answer kind of is no. The thing I enjoy doing is talking to younger people about politics.

AC: So if a person comes up to you and says, “Hey, I'm thinking about running for the legislature,” you'd tell them?

JK: I'd give them my “Good for you. Do it. Here's what I would do. Here's the things to think about” and do all I can to encourage them and help them because it's the greatest experience that anybody can have that's interested in politics. You know the state. You get to know the people of the state. You get to know 125 of the best and brightest people who run for office from that district, qualify, qualify. I walk in here, and I see these seats, and I remember who sat in them. It's just a warm feeling, really a warm feeling.

AC: So the process worked then. Do you think it's still working now?

JK: See, I don't know about now. It worked then. I sat right back here with Steve Cloud. We had great conversations. I can just point around to the different people that were good people.

AC: Well, I think we're kind of getting close to the end of our time here. Anything else you'd like to discuss or bring to my attention or share for posterity here in terms of any other reflections or advice or thoughts?

JK: We've got a great state. We've got great people. We've got great resources. The challenge is for the government to help and not get in the way. That's the important thing. And electing good people just is so critical.

AC: So optimistic about the future of our state?

JK: Have to be. Have to be. No matter how bad it gets, the good people will come out and change us, move us, and help us. I'm optimistic. Whenever I'm traveling, I go to the State Capitol. I sit and I go into their chambers. I get the same sense of awe. What a great country we have. What a great system we have. What a great ability to walk into these sacred halls and make policy and to safely walk out. That's a great thing that our forefathers did for us, and we've got to work hard to protect that because it can be lost in a minute.

AC: Well, thank you very much for your time today. Thank you for your thoughts, sharing those. Thank you for your public service in the legislature and afterwards in your community and around the state.

JK: Flattered. Thank you for honoring me.

AC: That's right.

[End of File]

