

Jim McLean: Hello, I'm Jim McLean, a member of the Kansas Oral History Project Board and a former reporter for the Kansas newspapers and public radio stations. Today is December 19, 2025, and I'm at the Kansas Capitol to interview the dean of the Statehouse Press Corps, John Hanna. Our videographer today, as always, is former Kansas State Representative, Dave Heinemann. This interview is part of the Kansas Oral History Project series exploring the contributions of reporters, editors, press secretaries, and others to policy-making in Kansas. Susie Murphy is the project coordinator. The Kansas Oral History Project is a nonprofit corporation. It's supported by donations from generous individuals and occasional grants.

Okay, John, we've done most of these interviews either at the Statehouse or Red Rocks, the home of William Allen White, Pulitzer-Prize-winning editor of the *Emporia Gazette*.

John Hanna: It's a great house. He's got like a Frank Lloyd Wright banister in it or something?

JM: Well, I learned that Frank Lloyd Wright was hired by White to renovate the house. The two of them got into a disagreement. Lloyd Wright essentially fired—he said, "I don't want to do this" because William Allen White wanted dormers. So, a little bit of an aside.

JH: And Frank Lloyd Wright was opposed.

JM: He hated them.

JH: Well, probably two potentially difficult, cranky individuals.

JM: Very interesting though. You're right about the house. Anyway, John is the Topeka correspondent for the Associated Press, (AP) a post you've held since 1999. Is that correct?

JH: Yes.

JM: But you've been here longer than that really. The AP hired you in '86?

JH: Yes, the Jurassic Age. Dinosaurs roamed the earth at that time.

JM: Were you an intern that year, and you started full time in '87, something like that?

JH: Well, the sequence was I was what they called the legislative reliever in those days. The Associated Press Topeka Bureau had three full-time staffers, and they brought somebody in for the legislative session. I did that in 1986. I'd not graduated from the University of Kansas yet.

JM: So, you were still a student.

JH: I was still technically a student. I wasn't taking classes, much to my parents' chagrin. They were worried that I'd just drop out and never go back, and that therefore their investment in my education would be wasted. I did go back and get the degree. In January of 1987, I did another relief stint. That ended in early May. I spent six weeks in the Kansas City bureau basically waiting for—predecessor Bill Vogrin was planning to leave to take a job I think in Peoria, Illinois?

JM: That's right. He went to Peoria.

JH: We used to have a Peoria bureau because Caterpillar had a big plant there and some other things. I was just waiting for Bill to leave to start in Topeka, and then I started in Topeka in July of 1987 full time. Then when my predecessor as correspondent retired, the great Lew Ferguson—

JM: The great Lew Ferguson, that's right.

JH: The god of Kansas journalism, then I got that job, and I've been here ever since. I know. It goes not seem possible. My daughter is now ten years older than I was when I started.

JM: I think I started in '81 as an intern, in '82 full time. I predated you just by a few years. But I remember when you got here.

JH: Yes. I was pretty fresh faced.

JM: I just saw that picture of you. I didn't recognize you.

JH: I know because I didn't have the beard. It's so funny. The first couple of years, I didn't have the beard, and very occasionally, a secretary would hand me a piece of paper and say, "Go take this to So and So." They thought I was a page because I was so young looking. So, I grew the beard to get around that.

The funny story is a couple of years ago, I was having my jaw measured for some dental procedure. They had me shave the beard off, and my daughter had never seen me without one, never. I texted a selfie to her, and she was just like, "No, no, grow it back. Grow it back immediately." And I was like, "Well, honey, I intend to."

JM: I had that exact same experience. I always had a beard. I shaved it off. The kids hated it. I grew it partially back.

JH: You may remember this. When she was a toddler, I used to bring her over to the Statehouse.

JM: I do remember that.

JH: The first floor office, there was a stain on it where I couldn't get her to the bathroom fast enough.

JM: I didn't know that part of it.

JH: There's a little spot right there. I'm sure she loves me telling that story. She came to visit often. I think I still have the cards that we used to get her onto the [Senate or House] floor.

JM: That's a great story. Going back to that time when I arrived here, you arrived here. Lew Ferguson was at the height of his powers, as you say. It was a very different time.

JH: It was.

JM: I think it's important to talk about that, then vs. now. You have that history. You joined the AP bureau, you said a moment ago, three full-time staffers with a fourth during the legislative session.

JH: Yes.

JM: And you guys covered everything. Committee meetings rated an entire individual story.

JH: Right. When I started, the theory was you cover as much as you can, and somebody somewhere would use it. I would cover sometimes five committee hearings in a day. You'd go to a hearing. You'd sit down and write a story immediately. You'd go to another hearing and sit down and write a story.

That is not the model now. Now we're looking to tell big, broad stories for the largest audience possible, an international audience, if we can. So, we're much more focused on what events here say about what's going on in the country writ large in terms of politics, that sort of thing. How is what Kansas is doing like what other states are doing? How is what legislators here are considering new for what's going on? What does it mean? It's a lot less process focused.

Some of that is by necessity as newsrooms have become smaller. Obviously right now for the moment, I'm the only person in the Topeka bureau. Newsrooms across the country have cut back over the last forty years.

JM: I want to explore that in a little more depth because you know the other saying, "Something lost, something gained," right?

JH: Right.

JM: You say the coverage now is a lot less "process focused."

JH: Yes.

JM: One of the things you hear today in the current political debate such as it is is the lack of a civics education. People just don't know how the government works in many cases. So, you're covering these big thematic stories. But back in the day, as you say, you would crank this stuff out and somebody somewhere would use it. The newspaper industry in this state was much more robust. The Harris newspapers were going full pitch. Every community of any size had a pretty good newspaper.

JH: Yes.

JM: And people were interested in—"Okay, this is a bill that has been introduced. Here's the first committee hearing. How did that hearing go? What are its prospects as we move through the process?" If people read the paper every day, they got a bit of a civics education, and we've lost that, I think, in a lot of cases.

JH: What's interesting to me, and I was thinking about this, I think the reason journalism has changed so much and particularly in this regard is that when I started, if you were somebody

who lived out in, say, Garden City or Salina or Hays or even Wichita, you did not have much access to what went on in this building other than what your legislator told you at an eggs and issues breakfast or [in] a newsletter. So, if you wanted to know what somebody said at a committee hearing, if you want to know what the testimony was, if you wanted essentially a short summary transcript of what went on, you had to read what was in the newspaper. That was the way you found out.

Well, of course, now if you want to know what's in a bill, it's online. If you want to know how your lawmaker voted, it's online. If you want to know what was said in the committee hearing—

JM: It's online.

JH: It's online, and since the pandemic, all committees have been live streamed. So, you can watch in real time. You can catch up to it later. You have to pay attention to how things are labeled on the YouTube site to get to what you want quickly, and sometimes if you've got a file that's twelve hours of video from the Senate, for example, late in a legislative session, you might have to go to the calendar and figure out what order things were taken up with.

JM: You're making the point, John—

JH: But my point is that there's a lot less need for us, news organizations, to regurgitate a transcript of what happened.

JM: Yes and no in the sense that let's say there's a three-hour hearing. If you're really interested in what's going on there, you might sit through most of that, right? If you're casually interested in it, you're not going to go there, and you're still not going to get the summary, and unless you go to social media, and there's no filter, there's no editorial filter of information.

JH: Right. It's the difference between—that's where we're supposed to come in collectively. Collectively as journalism, we're supposed to give shape and meaning and context to what's going on.

JM: For instance, you know enough about the process, if you're covering a hearing, you know if Legislator X steps up to the microphone and supports a bill, that's going to give it a stronger push than if Legislator Y steps up. You know that because you live here and you know the people.

JH: Right.

JM: So, there is a value added to the reporter on the scene here pushing that information.

JH: Sure. I don't discount even with all the—

JM: I'm not arguing with you. I'm just trying to point out—

JH: No, it's fine. I would say the issue is that we're supposed to provide the context. For example, nowadays if I'm going to be writing about—and this is an issue I've covered. I'm going

to be writing about a bill that deals with the lives of transgender people, let's say. That's been something I've covered a lot of. It's a bill that purports to—that's aimed at keeping transgender women out of women's restrooms.

I'm not going to write a story like that without talking about how many other states have done it, what they've done, how this bill compares, where this is coming from.

JM: How common it is that trans women invade women's restrooms—

JH: All of that stuff. That's the context that the average reader just cannot get very quickly. I mean, they can go looking for it if they want to make a bunch of phone calls, but your readers, viewers, people, users online because that's where most people are getting their news now on their phones and online, they've got lives. They're raising kids. They're picking them up from school. They're preparing meals. They're working. They're running kids to activities. They're caring for their elderly parents, all the things that happen in life. So, they don't—this is not—unless they're really, really, really invested in it, this is not their priority. Their priority are these other frankly important things

JM: And that's kind of my point. Back in the day, you'd put out—and particularly when I was doing radio reporting, you'd put out briefs that would give you quick reports on six or seven things that happened in the Statehouse. So, just reading that even in the midst of your busy day—

JH: You could get—yes, there's still a need for good journalism to help organize and make sense of what's going on and to write about patterns and trends and context. I think we're still trying to do that, but it's no secret that the journalism media environment is just a lot tougher.

JM: Oh, it's a lot tougher. I want—because you keep using the word “context,” which is a really important word when you're talking about journalism.

JH: Yes.

JM: When you're trying to set the scene for people and you're trying to put an issue in the proper context, again, all of those are value-laden words, “proper,” etc.

JH: But, for example, if you know what's being considered in Kansas is being considered in fourteen other states and the language of the bills is almost identical—

JM: You know it's coming from a common source. And why are they pushing it across the country?

JH: You go looking for the common source. How did the group—what is the group? How did they form? Why are they here? For example, again, with transgender rights issues, gender-affirming care, the state has banned it for minors. That's a proposal that went through two dozen states first. A few of the witnesses here at least were also witnesses at hearings in other states. So, those are the kind of things that you need that there is an organized national campaign.

JM: An orchestrated campaign.

JH: To deal with these issues. There are national groups that see this as a problem and are getting legislatures to act.

JM: That's important for the reader to understand—where it's coming from, how money is being spent, etc., etc. Who benefits? Who doesn't?

JH: And there are issues on the left where it's very similar.

JM: Absolutely. I want to raise the word "context" and talk about it a little bit. As you know from being in the position and in journalism for as long as you have, right now, one of the things that has changed, there was always a little bit of this, but it's very pronounced now, you hear things like "the lame-stream media," "the liberal elite," "the liberal media," you hear that kind of thing all the time.

JH: Sure. Back when I started, you heard "the liberal media," but you didn't hear "lame-stream media." I don't recall anybody throwing around the term "fake news."

JM: Still it was a little bit more on the margins than it is today. Now, it's front and center all the time. The reason I'm asking the question is, if the job of a journalist is to set "context," you're using your judgment to do that.

JH: Yes.

JM: That is kind of I think what people are going for. They read a story. If it doesn't agree with their world view, your attempt to set context means you're slanting the story one way or another. It's really hard to do your job as a reporter when people are jumping to conclusions that somehow you're injecting your point of view versus just trying to set a broader context for something.

JH: People will accept context more if it's more in the line of "Twenty-four other states have been doing this." Where they start to push back is when you start looking at the forces behind why that is.

JM: Or when you start quoting research, which people think you can cherry pick.

JH: Quoting research. For example, let's take the 2020 presidential election. It's pretty widely known that President Trump claims it was stolen from him. It was not.

JM: Right. It's important to say that in every story.

JH: If you're going to quote somebody talking about the corrupt 2020 election, you have to go through the evidence that shows it wasn't stolen or link to something that shows it wasn't stolen. And even after that, you have to understand as part of the context when they're talking about, for example, election laws, that there's still a widespread belief in that especially amongst Republicans. It would be interesting to see if the roles had been reversed, let's say if Hillary Clinton had won a very narrow election under there same circumstances and then lost

the next election, it would be interesting to see whether Democrats would be talking about that in a different way.

JM: You can go back to the Bush [vs] Gore election.

JH: Sure. There was a little of that talk.

JM: There was a little of that talk. It was hotly contested, People counting chads in Florida, the difference being even if Al Gore thought he was cheated, thought there was any malfeasance, he voluntarily stepped aside and said, "You won." That peaceful transfer of power is essential.

JH: It is. The difference twenty-five years makes in the partisan atmosphere, it's a lot more bitter than it was.

JM: Because of your vantage point here at the Kansas Statehouse and you've already talked about it to some degree, some of the legislation that moves through here has essentially been written someplace else. It's spread across the country, and there's an organized effort to get it passed in legislatures across the country.

JH: Sure.

JM: That points to the fact that politics in states now have become much more nationalized.

JH: Yes. It is much, much more nationalized. It used to be that—what I would say is if you're covering Congressional campaigns for the US House, almost universally, you could swap out the candidate from your state of one party and bring in a candidate of another state from the same party for a week and nobody would notice a change in the message because there wouldn't be one. They would be talking about the same things even down to the language of the talking points being exactly the same, maybe modified a little for regional speech idioms and stuff like that. But I mean all of those campaigns are very much nationally driven, national themes. The leadership is advising them on what to talk about and how to talk about it. So, you don't get that regional flavor anymore of the Democratic governor who's mad at the national party in a state like Kansas over farm policy, for example.

JM: Who expresses his or her independence for parochial reasons. "I'm from Kansas, and I don't like" —

JH: Exactly. "It's not going to play in my state."

JM: Right. We see some evidence—

JH: I mean, [Governor] Laura Kelly tried to do that at the end of the COVID pandemic with the vaccine mandates. But the fact is that you get less of that now than you used to, and I think some of that is the shrinking of both parties' coalitions.

JM: You can substitute the word "base" for "coalitions."

JH: Right. The Democratic Party used to be very broad.

JM: Labor to academic elites.

JH: Labor to academic elites, but even more often distressingly, Southern segregationists in the fifties and sixties with Hubert Humphrey and civil rights leaders.

JM: 1948, Strom Thurmond walked out of the Republican convention.

JH: That's right.

JM: Hubert Humphrey was the mayor of Minneapolis at the time.

JH: That's right. That was the 1948 convention. That's where he really made his mark.

JM: And Strom Thurmond formed the Dixiecrat Party.

JH: Right, and in the Republican Party, you also had this broad coalition. You had Nelson Rockefeller, a socially liberal—

JM: You still had the legacy of Lincoln to some degree.

JH: You had that legacy, and you also had the Ronald Reagan Republicans. You had even more conservative Republicans. You might even say you had a few John Birch Society adherents somewhere in the mix. What's happened is that the parties have sorted themselves, and you see it here in the legislature. When I started, you had state senators who were Democrats from western Kansas.

JM: A lot of them.

JH: Joe Norvell from Hays. Leroy Hayden from Satanta.

JM: Frank Gaines from Augusta.

JH: Frank Gaines from Augusta, and on a few issues, those—Norma Daniels from Valley Center—on abortion issues, those lawmakers could be every bit as conservative as some of the Republicans.

JM: Fred Weaver from Baxter Springs in the House, the same thing.

JH: Yes, and then you would have Republicans—Wint Winter, Jr would be a good example who were on a few issues every bit as liberal as some of the Democrats.

JM: Norman Gaar.

JH: Norman Gaar, Stormin' Norman. Wasn't that his nickname?

JM: We'll ask Dave Heinemann here after the interviews. He knows all when it comes to the Statehouse.

JH: That was a few years before my time.

JM: There was also Norman Justice. I think he was known as Stormin' Norman from Wichita.

JH: I thought he was from Kansas City. Maybe he was from—

JM: I think you're right. You're right. Congressman [Jim] Slattery used to say when he was in the Kansas House, he started every campaign speech by saying, "I was in the Kansas House. I sat between Justice and Love"—Clarence Love and Norman Justice. And he was born in the community of Good Intent. That was his way . . .

JH: That was like Bill Clinton in Hope, Arkansas.

JM: Exactly. You made the point though, and you see this manifest I think in the behavior of members of Congress right now who criticizing Trump is anathema. They don't do it because again you're right. They have to answer to a base, and they may complain in private but not publicly. It's that kind of—the message is the message. It's standard. It is standardized across the party.

JH: And you see it trickle down even to legislative races. If you're a Democratic candidate—if you were a Democratic candidate in the teens in Kansas, and you were at a convention and you bumped into Barack Obama, oh, woe is you. The pictures were coming out. "He was an Obama delegate." That really hurt Democrats. There was that real reaction amongst Republicans to the Obama presidency. Now in Johnson County, it can hurt some—in much of the county to be identified with Donald Trump. That influence is there. I think some of that is the flood of social media just inundating everybody with national and occasionally international news, but it's mostly national politics.

JM: It's a conspiracy of circumstances, John. Social media is an instrument. People are looking to reinforce bias. It's kind of a complicated brew, I think, but you're right. Social media has enabled it in a way I think that would have been fine before.

JH: I was talking to a Syracuse University professor yesterday, Jennifer Stromer-Galley. She wrote a book about social media through the 2016 campaign from that period from 1996 through 2016. One of the things she pointed out that researchers have kind of mapped is that in the mass media age, the pre-Internet age, it was a broadcast model. People hear the gatekeepers at the top, possibly elites, sending out information to voters here, the crowd. Now it's more of a network model. You have different places that you can get information from, and people will talk about the most effective thing in politics is not for the candidate to connect with you and talk to you, but to have your friend who's met the candidate come and talk to you. Your friend who you trust come to you and say, "Hey, I met this guy, and he's great. You really should go and vote for him."

That's a new thing in politics, and social media is just—like everything, it's both a blessing and a curse. There are days, I will be honest, I look at what's on social media, and I go, "Wouldn't the world be better off?" But then you wouldn't keep up with people you went to college with. All those platforms make it easier to find sources.

JM: People I went to high school with more than fifty years ago I'm still in touch with because of Facebook.

JH: Right. If I'm looking to find somebody, for example—let's take an example. There was a tornado in a small town, and I'm looking to find somebody who was in the middle of it, you do some Googling, and you find people who have posted video, and you talk to them, and you message their friends, and all of that. You get real-time commentary on events through X and other platforms.

You know, if I need to check on somebody's credentials, what title they have, how long they've been in some place, LinkedIn is there, and I can know that before I interview them. But on the other hand, it's also easier for people to scream things at you, I mean, metaphorically, but to—

JM: You're right. Blessing, curse. It's a good thing you inject that into the conversation. Because I don't want to pretend—I don't want to have the whole conversation dominated by "the good old days."

JH: Right. There were some good things about the good old day, but—

JM: Absolutely. You can just cite a fact. When you and I first started, it was to some extent the good old days for newspapers.

JH: Sure.

JM: It is not today. That's just a fact.

JH: The technology has changed. People are getting most of their news online. They're getting it on their phones. Any news organization that resists that is in trouble, and they're not.

JM: But newspapers have had a hard time monetizing that digital stuff.

JH: Right, because—I'm far from an expert on this. I'm just going to give my impression of what happened. I think there was at least a decade of chaos and uncertainty about how to monetize things. I remember first you had a paywall, and then you were stupid for having a paywall because nobody would do that. Then you were stupid for not having a paywall because you were giving it away for free. Did the technology allow you to charge somebody a fraction of a cent for every story they hit, or how would you do that? And in the meantime, you have things like Craigslist, for example.

JM: But even paywalls, that's like thinking that the fifty cents to a dollar you used to pay for a newspaper paid for it, but, no, it was the advertising that paid for newspapers and that paid for any media organizations.

JH: The advertising business has changed.

JM: They have so many more options today. They can target audiences more precisely than putting it into the local newspaper, which some people read and some people don't.

JH: I remember a friend of mine worked for an ad agency in the late eighties, early nineties. He remembers that the agency got an account with a national retail chain. They designed inserts that they put into newspapers. My friend went to the head of the ad agency and said, "Why are we doing this? You know what they're doing. They're learning how to do this so that in a year or two, they won't need us, and they can do it in-house, and then we won't have this contract." And sure enough, the ad agency was out of business within five years because that's exactly what happened. The retail company watched and learned and then said, "We can do it better and cheaper."

Way back in the day, deodorant used to come in little cardboard boxes. The reason it doesn't now is that Walmart wanted to sell all that deodorant for ten cents less a unit to beat its competition. And how do you do that? You get rid of the cardboard box because that's an extra cost. That's great if you're the consumer. That's not so great if you're the cardboard box maker.

You know, that's an example, but over the years, globalization has pushed all of this. We're getting a little far afield here, but it's also affected the media.

JM: It's affected everything. It's affected journalism. It's affected agriculture. We could go down the list.

JH: We could go on, but the truth is now people have all these things that they think are sources of information, and the question is "How do you distinguish between a good source and a not-so-good source?"

JM: Theoretically, having multiple options is a good thing. If people would discipline themselves to read this and then go and read this. Way, way back when, most communities in Kansas of any size had a Republican newspaper and a Democratic newspaper.

JH: Sure.

JM: Sometimes more than one of each. So, if you wanted to get a variety of angles on a particular story, it was pretty easy to do. Theoretically, it's not a bad thing to have those options if people discipline themselves to do that. What's happening is they're going to reinforce their existing—

JH: And there's starting to be some studies in sociology and social science of the problem of too much choice.

JM: Absolutely. It's paralyzing.

JH: It can be paralyzing, and therefore you make no choice, or you limit yourself to one thing because it's just too overwhelming. Nate Silver, the polling person guru, I think he wrote a book called *The Signal and the Noise: [The Art and Science of Prediction]*, and how do you distinguish the good data, the signal, from the noise? That is something now as journalists we're supposed to help with.

JM: Which is going to become an infinitely difficult more problem with AI when you can't determine whether a picture is real or it's not. It's just going to get more problematic.

JH: If you want to scare yourself, there are a lot of AI doom videos about—

JM: Let's not go down that rabbit hole right now.

JH: How we'll all be dead in ten years.

JM: I do want to take you back, reel us back in to talk a little bit about Lew Ferguson.

JH: Yes, Lew.

JM: We referred to him a moment ago.

JH: I try not to get verklempt when I'm talking about Lew.

JM: He's a wonderful person.

JH: A great.

JM: But Lew Ferguson was a sports reporter in Minnesota.

JH: And Kansas City.

JM: Then the AP decided to send him to the Statehouse in Topeka. He ruled the roost here for years. A native of Oklahoma, as we've said, a wonderful guy. But the Associated Press Bureau in those days with Lew and Elon [Torrence] just before your arrival and people like Barry Massey and Vogrin—

JH: Barry Massey who then went to New Mexico and Bill Vogrin, Peoria and then Colorado. And Elon Torrence—well, we can talk about Elon a little bit, but he was a newsman from 1946 through 1981, and pretty much every major event in those years he covered. The Clutter—

JM: The Clutter Murders out in Holcomb.

JH: The *In Cold Blood* murders, he covered that. The infamous Triple Play of January 1957, he covered that.

JM: Explain the Triple Play.

JH: Fred Hall. What happened was—

JM: We could invite Dave in to explain this, too.

JH: Basically, what happened was Fred Hall was an Eisenhower Republican. He'd been lieutenant governor, elected governor in 1954. They ran for two-year terms in those days. He was a very, very divisive figure within the Republican Party. He split the Republican Party, opposed, as I recall, the Right to Work Amendment. So, in 1956, he lost the primary, and that

was the year Democrat George Docking won the governor's race because Republican were so split. So it's after the election. It's at the end of the year coming up—

JM: But before Docking's inaugural, right?

JM: Yes, it's before Docking is inaugurated. It's early January, and the chief justice of the Supreme Court, a guy named William Smith, has been ill. Fred Hall—this was back when they elected Supreme Court members. Smith was Hall's mentor. This is what I've read and how it's been related to me, a little bit from Elon. Smith retires, creating a vacancy on the Supreme Court. Fred Hall, maybe seven or eight or eleven days before he's going to leave office and not be in office anymore, he steps down as governor. The lieutenant governor, John McCuish, gets elevated to governor for the last few days, and almost immediately within an hour, he appoints Fred Hall to the Supreme Court.

They called that the Triple Play. A newspaper in Topeka called it "politics of a low order." People were furious because, as Elon said, they thought they'd gotten rid of Fred Hall, and here he was back. There'd been some discussion about changing the method of selection for Supreme Court justices.

JM: That's what ushered in—

JH: That was the thing that put it over the top.

JM: And we're about ready to debate again whether we should go back to electing.

JH: Whether we should go back to electing Supreme Court justices.

JM: I'm sure the memory of the Triple Play, it can't take as long to explain. The memory of the Triple Play will be prominent in the arguments against doing it.

JH: I'm sure it will be mentioned.

JM: Lew Ferguson, talk a little bit about him. Would it be fair to call him your mentor?

JH: Yes, it would be very fair. Mentor, second father figure. The bureau when he ran it was known informally in some parts of the AP as "Lew Ferguson's Finishing School for Young Reporters." Lew was very much a sink-or-swim guy. He would throw you right in. He would help you. He would make sure you weren't going to drown.

JM: Cover to these five committee meetings.

JH: Right. I will say that was the one advantage of covering lots and lots and lots of meetings. You learned fast. You learned to write fast. And you learned to analyze fast. But you also learned a lot about state government. You were covering stuff all over the place. It was a great education. He had these little sayings.

JM: His Okie-isms.

JH: His Okie-isms. I remember the first time I gave a long title for a lobbyist, and Lew was like, "He's a lobbyist, isn't he?" "Well, this"—he said, "Was he wearing a badge?" I said, "Yes, he was wearing a badge." "Well, if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's a duck. Lobbyist."

If we needed the story five minutes ago, it was, "Come on, whip that pony home. We're not running a weekly here."

JM: Something about a chicken on a June bug. I remember that.

JH: Nobody acted quickly. They "jumped on it faster than a chicken on a June bug." I loved that one. "It doesn't mean a spit in the wind" if something wasn't that meaningful. All these great—but he was a great guy to work for.

JM: He was. He was very charismatic. And the AP Bureau had some power in those days, One, because you covered everything, but every newspaper in the state was an AP subscriber. Every radio station took AP—

JH: Yes, just about everyone.

JM: When I was down in Parsons on the mighty KLKC, I'd rip the wire. That would be the newscast. A lot of it would emanate from here. It was very powerful.

Now you had some competition. The UPI [United Press International] Bureau—

JH: Was right next door.

JM: Right next door.

JH: Yes, John Braden, and he had—

JM: Barbara Rochevitz and Liz Leech.

JH: Yes, they were before my time, but what I remember about John Braden's office was he had a huge poster of John Wayne on the wall. You don't remember the poster?

JM: I don't know. I don't know why.

JH: He had a huge poster of John Wayne. He was a big fan.

JM: But there was a real competition between you.

JH: Yes.

JM: And UPI had a fair number of subscribers around the state, too.

JH: Sure.

JM: Many papers took both.

JH: Yes.

JM: Those days are long gone.

JH: Then you had Harris News Service at one point.

JM: Harris News Service, exactly.

JH: Harris chain papers.

JM: The press corps, we don't know exact numbers, but when you first arrived when I got here, twenty strong maybe here in the Statehouse?

JH: Perhaps.

JM: You had three. UPI had three. Harris had one.

JH: Actually, maybe Harris might have had two at one point. And *The [Wichita] Eagle* had a couple of reporters.

JM: The *[Kansas City] Star* had a couple.

JH: The *Star* had a couple. There was also the *Kansas City Times*. The two papers merged. You had John Petterson who was the—he was the morning paper, the *Times*.

JM: He came from *The Wichita Eagle*.

JH: And then [Jim] Sullenger was the *Star* guy.

JM: Rick Tapscott.

JH: All of it.

JM: Seth Efron from *The Wichita Eagle*. Diane Silver.

JH: I remember Diane.

JM: Forrest Gossett.

JH: Forrest Gossett.

JM: All these people. It's good to throw their names in here because it was—

JH: Yes, somebody I've worked with since with the AP, Julie Wright.

JM: Oh, Julie Wright, sure, of course. She went on to *The Star*, too, didn't she?

JH: I don't know. She went on to Anchorage, Alaska was one posting she—

JM: I think she was at *The Eagle* for a while, too.

JH: She did cover the Statehouse for *The Eagle*. She was in Lawrence for a bit, and then she became our Kansas City news editor for Missouri and Kansas, and now she's supervising stories about trends in state legislatures.

JM: Back in those days, too, the Topeka stations had full-time reporters here.

JH: Yes, Bernie Koch.

JM: Bernie Koch. Lance Ross who was at KPR, Kansas Public Radio, then went to one of the stations in Wichita. You had Walt Riker who then went on to be Bob Dole's press secretary was WIBW at the time. Tim Sherwood for Channel 27. I remember all those guys.

But the point of that is you had a real concentration of media in this building every day.

JH: Yes.

JM: Whatever was happening here, it reached people across the state one way or the other.

JH: Yes.

JM: That has changed dramatically. As you said, the AP has gone from four people during the session to just you.

JH: Yes.

JM: Is covering the Kansas legislature your primary obligation today?

JH: Yes in the sense that I am looking for big national regional stories that can be told out of Kansas.

JM: Or if somebody else in the AP is doing a story and you contribute to it from here?

JH: That happens a lot, but there are things that happen in Kansas that are of national interest. For example, when ICE was doing some no-bid contracts to get detention centers opened quickly, one of the places they were looking at was a former CoreCivic facility in Leavenworth.

JM: CoreCivic is a private prison company.

JH: So, there's been some controversy over that, ironically, because Leavenworth is considered a prison town. So, that was a story, a national story with national context but told out of Kansas. We just had this story the other day about the Prairie Band Potawatomi, their LLC signed a contract with ICE.

JM: And all the leadership were deposed.

JH: Yes, of the group. It was very, very controversial. That's actually an issue that's been playing out across the country with Native American nations. So, for example, stuff with transgender rights and just general political stuff.

JM: I know you're covered this. Kansas has become a story, too, in looking at which states are going to redistrict—

JH: Yes, how can I forget?

JM: At President Trump's behest and which aren't?

JH: What's different is now I'm a little more regional. So, I come to the Kansas debate on redistricting having watched some of the debate.

JM: You were reporting on the Texas debate.

JH: Right. I was helping the Texas coverage.

JM: Which brings me to my point. The question is, rather than have four people concentrating on what's going on here and then Lew Ferguson coming in and doing all the high school sports scores, right?

JH: Yes.

JM: That was part of the bureau's responsibility, too.

JH: Yes.

JM: Rather than doing that, you're now more a regional reporter.

JH: Right.

JM: How many states are you responsible for?

JH: I'm not technically responsible for them, but my region is Arkansas—I call it TOKMAL because it sounds Klingon. It's Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana.

JM: You're answering to a lot of people in the system.

JH: Well, yes, but it's one region, and we work together. Obviously, the thing is that Texas is its own entity.

JM: That's right. They still want to be their own nation.

JH: It virtually is, and it's very interesting. But what's interesting is there are a lot of commonalities between Texas and Kansas. The redistricting thing is one thing. In Texas, the Democrats are hoping that they can make a good run for the US Senate this year.

JM: They're always hoping.

JH: They're always hoping. So far, at least over the last however many years, they've fallen short. We've seen that in Kansas. We've seen a number of races over the last twenty years where Democrats or in the case of 2014, the Independent candidate Greg Orman, they were thought to have a great chance.

JM: Then Barbara Bollier against—

JH: Roger Marshall.

JM: The Democrats haven't had a US Senator since—

JH: 1932.

JM: Since the New Deal.

JH: I looked it up, 1932.

JM: He only lasted one term.

JH: That's right. We're fast approaching 100 years. And that's despite having elected many Democratic governors. Sam Brownback back in the day told me once that his theory was that Kansas voters wanted the government to be more conservative the further away it was from them. That's why Republicans did perpetually so well in federal races. That was his theory.

JM: Let me shift gears. What prompted you to go into journalism? Do you remember? Did you always think that you might want to do that?

JH: I was always—I started in high school. I'm trying to remember. I think there was an English assignment. We were reading Henry David Thoreau, and I think what happened was—

JM: He was pretty woke.

JH: Yes, he was pretty woke for his day. I think what they wanted us to do was to create a newspaper front page about Henry David Thoreau. This is my vague memory, and it was kind of fun, and it was kind of cool. I had to look at newspapers.

JM: Plus you always had an interest in history.

JH: I always had an interest in history. Then I know that this is hard to believe maybe, but I was really pretty shy when I was a teenager.

JM: That is hard to believe, John. But now that I think about it, you were pretty shy when you first showed up here, too.

JH: It was new—anyway, so working on a student newspaper was a way to get out and talk to people. I liked it. I had a Spanish teacher who had Jayhawks on her wall. We had this conversation in bad Spanish on my part—

JM: You were living in Texas at the time.

JH: I was living in Texas at the time, Richardson, Texas, which is north of Dallas. The community is completely different now, much more diverse than it was when I lived there. The high school is completely—they redid the front. It's a magnet school now. It's really quite amazing.

It was interesting because the journalism teacher there was a woman named Sarah Scott. She's still alive and on Facebook. So, this Spanish teacher had Jayhawks on the wall, and I wanted to know what those were, and she explained it was the University of Kansas. That was the mascot for the University of Kansas. She said they had a very good journalism program. I perked up. It was very highly rated at that time, and I lose track of where things are, but they had a great journalism school.

So, my parents and I came up here during the spring. If you want to entice somebody to go to KU—

JM: Do it in the spring.

JH: Do it in the spring. That's the proper time because the campus is in bloom, and it's great. There was an assistant dean named Dana Leibengood. Suzanne Shaw would be there.

JM: Calder Pickett.

JH: Calder Pickett was one of the professors. Del Brinkman was the dean, I think.

JM: Who was the great editorial writer?

JH: John Bremner, six-foot-six [height], deep voice.

JM: Former Catholic priest.

JH: Former Catholic priest from Australia, six-foot-six, white beard, looked like God.

JM: Yes. When you were in his presence in class, it felt like God was at the head of the room.

JH: Yes. You heard stories. I never saw him do this, but you heard stories, and I don't know if you could get away with this now—you heard stories about how the kids in class couldn't answer questions, and he'd run to the window and open the window and yell at a passerby, "Help, help, help me! They're all idiots! They don't know the parts of speech," that sort of thing. He was a great teacher.

JM: Yes.

JH: He was a marvelous teacher, and the thing you learned about him was he wanted you to answer in class. He did not want you to cower in the corner, afraid to say anything.

JM: That helped you out of your shell, too.

JH: Yes, that helped me out of my shell because I'm also a smart aleck. I remember he was talking—he used to give speeches about grammar and writing and all of these things.

JM: He was hell on wheels when it came to grammar.

JH: Yes. He was talking about how he just gave a speech in Kalamazoo, Michigan. All apologies to the great people in Kalamazoo, Michigan, but he asked what the main industry in Kalamazoo,

Michigan was, and I couldn't help myself. I said, "Unemployment?" And he said, "Mr. Hanna will find out what the biggest industry in Kalamazoo, Michigan is."

JM: It was what, John?

JH: Pharmaceuticals.

JM: There you go.

JH: Pharmaceuticals. At that time, it was a pharmaceutical hub. I still remember that.

JM: So, your origin story is—

JH: I came up here. They treated me—

JM: But, no, the origin story goes back again to the teachers you met along the way.

JH: Sure.

JM: Like so many people.

JH: Sure.

JM: Somebody inspired you almost serendipitously.

JH: Yes. Then from like seventeen on, this was what I wanted to do. Now there've been a few times where I've wondered whether I've narrowed my focus in life too much.

JM: Every journalist in life has wondered whether they should have gone to law school.

JH: My mother wondered whether I should have gone to law school. I don't know that I would have made a very good lawyer. Who knows? But I've done this.

JM: For me in the post-Watergate era, everybody wanted to be Robert Redford and/or Dustin Hoffman, Woodward and Bernstein. That's changed very much today. Journalism as a profession, it's not as aspirational as it used to be.

JH: No. I mean, people don't see it as something—not as many people see it as something to aspire to.

JM: The crusading journalist. I want to talk to you about this because the AP had a big influence on this. Back in the day, if you're looking at old film noir, old movies from the thirties and the forties the journalist was always street-wise, some guy who didn't have a college degree, but he was street-wise, a smart-alecky guy.

JH: Very working class.

JM: Very working class, kind of a Joe. That was the newspaper man with the press flag in his hat.

JH: There were a couple of great scenes in *Citizen Kane* where the editor—*Citizen Kane* says to the editor of the newspaper, he's taking over, the *Chronicle* has this inch-high headline, and the editor sputters, "Well, the news wasn't big enough for an inch-high headline," and Kane says, "Well, if you make the headline an inch high, it will be."

JM: It's big enough, right.

JH: It's big enough. Then he tells the story about sending a reporter out to talk to somebody who the wife is missing and the husband probably murdered her, and the editor says, "We don't know that. We don't know that." "If the neighbor resists talking to you, call him an anarchist loudly and leave." That kind of shenanigans—

JM: Yellow journalism.

JH: Yellow journalism, unprofessional. I think there was a real move to professionalize journalism, which is good.

JM: The post-Watergate era when journalism was professionalized in many regards coincides with a lot of reform of governments including here in Kansas.

JH: Yes.

JM: State governments. They got a lot more professional. The reason I wanted to talk to you about that is because the Associated Press, I learned this in Calder Pickett's History of Journalism class at KU, the advent of the wire service. The AP style was always the "He said, she said." Every story was balanced. If you give this person four or five inches in a story—

JH: You had to because you were selling to publishers of all political persuasions.

JM: That's right. You were selling to both the Democratic newspaper and the Republican newspaper.

JH: And we're still trying to do that, by the way.

JM: Oh, I know. That became known as AP style.

JH: Yes.

JM: Then it filtered down through the ranks, and everybody used it. The AP Stylebook was the Bible.

JH: It was, and it became a premium on, and we still do have a premium at AP on factual—you want the journalism to be factual.

JM: We could have a whole other conversation about whether that style though is adequate in these times.

JH: We could.

JM: Because it presupposes there are two sides to an argument that are of equal veracity, and we know that that's not true.

JH: If you're doing a story about—these days, if you're doing a story about—nobody's going to call up the Klan to get a comment to counter anything for example.

JM: I don't know.

JH: I mean, unless it involves the Klan directly.

JM: I know what you're trying to say. The pressure is on.

JH: If somebody declares that racism is bad, you're not going to call the Klan Wizard up and say, "Hey, tell us that racism is good."

JM: Give us the alternate point of view, yes.

JH: You're not going to do that, but you are if you're trying to explain what happened. You're going to have to get comments from the people who did it and ask them why they did it and then say why they did it, but what's different now than was different forty years ago is if they say something that is demonstrably not true, you need to point that out.

JM: Here's the problem. As newspapers—

JH: But then the question becomes an argument over what is demonstrably not true.

JM: You can have that argument, but even just—

JH: You have to be careful.

JM: Yes, you have to be careful. But just procedurally, as newsrooms hollow out, empty out, and there are fewer reporters trying to cover many, many things, and as you know, you don't have four people here who are steeped in the process and understand the process, you have to have a reporter who knows enough to know something is right or wrong.

JH: Yes.

JM: And then has to be able to defend the decision, to point that out in a story. Many newsrooms, many media operations don't have that kind of institutional knowledge.

JH: That's the downside. The upside is, and there is an upside to newsrooms being smaller, the upside though is that information is accessible more in a way. If, for example, people are talking about what was said at a meeting, you know, a City Council meeting for example, there's a very good chance that there's video of that meeting, and you can go look yourself.

JM: Yes, but we have people in public life now who deny saying what they clearly said on videotape.

JH: Well, I don't know if you can do much about that.

JM: Well, in a story you then have to point out, “He denied saying this. However, there’s a tape that says he said exactly that.”

JH: Right, and it’s at 12:4—

JM: Is that context, or are you going to be pilloried because of the liberal media trying to—

JH: If it’s on video or in a document or something, you point it out.

JM: Until you get to the point where you can’t tell fake video from—

JH: With artificial intelligence, I don’t know that anybody is going to be deep faking routine City Council meetings, but—

JM: You never know, John.

JH: Well, you don’t.

JM: I’m glad I’m as old as I am. I’m not sure I could cope with the challenges that are coming to reporters in the relatively near future.

JH: You know, so far what I have discovered is that all of the change that has come to my news organization, all of it, this movement towards bigger, sweeper stories, the expectation that we can shoot video and shoot photos, the discussions of different ways to tell a story as opposed to straight-ahead narrative, everything from photo essays to—we call it a “what to know” or “things to know” chunky text is our phrase for it where instead of a straight-ahead narrative story, it’s “Here’s what to know,” and that is often much more useful to readers.

What I have discovered is that it basically gives me a different job every five to six years. It’s not like I’ve had the same job for 40 years. I’m getting these new challenges. I’m learning new things. Because I’ve had to help with coverage in Texas, I’m relearning things about a state that I went to high school in, and I’m meeting new and different people, seeing the strains where there are people in Texas who are like Kansas. There are people in Texas who are like Kansas only bigger.

JM: It’s led to some personal growth for you, notwithstanding the—

JH: Yes. And I do wish there were more reporters. I do wish there were more viable weekly and daily newspapers.

JM: I’ve had this experience, too, where all of a sudden, you have to become a photographer, too.

JH: Sure.

JM: You’re not just a reporter and writer. I go back to the days when Bern Ketchum was around the Statehouse for *The Topeka Capital-Journal*.

JH: A great photographer.

JM: He's a great person, a great photographer, but that's kind of my point is he didn't have to write. He didn't have to do this. All he had to do was get really good pictures, and his pictures sometimes told a story as well as a thousand—

JH: They were amazing

JM: They were just amazing.

JH: Our guy in Kansas City, Charlie Riedel was that way, some of the most amazing—if you remember the Gulf oil spill and the picture of the bird covered in black goo, that was his.

JM: If you've ever been to the Newseum in DC and seen the Pulitzer Prize-winning photos—my point is that Bern was just a great photographer.

JH: A great photographer, and he had the ability and some would say luxury—

JM: And Thad Allton, too, at the *Capital-Journal*.

JH: Thad Allton.

JM: When I was a reporter, I had to go and I had to do my job, but I didn't have to worry about getting a great picture.

JH: Yes.

JM: You take some very good photographs.

JH: But I'm not Charlie Riedel or Thad Allton or Bern Ketchum.

JM: So, we've lost a little bit of something there, I think, just artistically.

JH: Sure. You remember—maybe you remember the Saturday Night Live skit with Al Franken playing the reporter with a helmet cam.

JM: That was so heavy—

JH: That he started to pass out. That was a joke, but now we all have cameras in our pockets. Yes, there are some times when I feel like I don't—when I feel like I don't want to be responsible for videos and photos and text all at once, but that's not the world I live in.

JM: So, rapid-fire, John, we've had a couple of conversations about more recent stories, but over your almost forty years, what stands out in your mind in terms of stories you've covered? If you got here in '86, '87, you were here when all the Constitutional amendments were passing.

JH: Yes. I remember those. I remember the start-up of the lottery. I remember the start-up of parimutuel racing. A couple, the Kansas adjunct to the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995.

JM: Of course. You covered a lot of that.

JH: Yes. Terry Nichols, the accomplice, was living in Herington, Kansas. Timothy McVeigh stayed in a hotel room in Junction City. They stole the—I think it was Nichols who was accused of stealing the blasting caps from a quarry outside Marion.

JM: And they loaded the trunk here.

JH: Yes, they loaded the trunk here in Kansas. So, all of that. I vividly remember 9/11, not so much for direct—I mean, everybody was covering something on 9/11.

JM: We put out a special edition.

JH: But I just remember the day. I remember hearing the news reports of the first crash and the Twin Towers and thinking, “That’s weird. That’s like the one with the Empire State Building back in the forties.” Then I was driving my daughter to school. Then somebody talks about the crash out, headed towards the Pentagon. You knew it wasn’t an accident.

Then I got to the school. They used to have—they had TVs in the schools because before the kids went into class, they would show them PBS stuff like *Reading Rainbow* and *Between the Lions*, great stuff for kids. But there was a line of TVs down the hallway, and they were all turned to CNN.

JM: The smoldering Twin Towers.

JH: The smoldering Twin Towers. I remember watching them crash on television. I remember the Challenger explosion because I remember leaning over the teletype we used to have that spit out the wires and looking at the story, and it’s something like “The space shuttle Challenger exploded on lift-off,” and I went “Exploded? That’s a weird verb to use.” Well, of course, it had exploded, “Wait, turn on the television. Oh, boom, yes.” A terrible, terrible accident.

So, those things I remember. I remember coverage of the pandemic.

JM: Oh, my gosh, yes.

JH: Because you couldn’t escape it. Just in terms of Kansas politics—

JM: Lee Norman in his lab coat.

JH: Lee Norman in his lab coat.

JM: Which is now on display at the newly renovated [Kansas Museum of] History, his lab coat.

JH: Boy, does anybody want to relive those days? I remember the 1990 campaign that Joan Finney won to become the first woman governor.

JM: She beat John Carlin in the primary.

JH: She beat John Carlin in the primary, which I don’t know how many people actually expected that.

JM: Not very many.

JH: Not very many. Then she unseated Mike Hayden, the Republican incumbent.

JM: What was it that Mike Hayden in the debate—he asked her about—

JH: What kind of airplanes the Kansas Air National Guard flew, and she was just like—what I remember, he asked her that, and—he had won a primary against Nestor Weigand, a Wichita real estate developer, and asked him a question during the debate about Medicaid, and Nestor Weigand had gotten tangled up in the answer and said Medicare.

JM: He wanted to put her on the spot

JH: He wanted to put her on the spot, and she just looked at him and said, “Oh, no, you did that to Nestor. You’re not going to do it to me.”

JM: “I’m not going to play.”

JH: “I’m not going to play.” And that was when you knew she was probably going to win.

JM: She had an uncanny ability to remember people that she met over the years. She was an aide to Frank Carlson when he was in the US Senate and, of course, was the long-time state treasurer.

JH: She was really an interesting person because she would both, as a reporter, she would both come up to you in public and give you a hug, which as a reporter is kind of mortifying, nice, but it’s kind of mortifying, and then she would call you up and chew you out about a story you wrote directly, personally, herself.

One time she called me up, she didn’t like something I wrote, and she said, “Well, you did it to me again.”

JM: I’m going to test your memory here on something specific. It relates to me a little bit and sometimes I’m accused of talking too much in these interviews.

JH: We get going here.

JM: This is a story that happened to you and I both at the same time. Of course, you remember the BioCORE stories that you and I were reporting.

JH: Yes, gosh. I have to admit that I was a little later to see the potential issues.

JM: Than I was

JH: Than you were. You were on it first.

JM: I remember, and you were critical of some of my—anyway, that’s not the story. The story was that Kansas had an investment fund, and we had invested in numerous businesses.

JH: The J-curve.

JM: I knew you were going to bring that up. The KTEC [Kansas Technology Enterprise Corporation]. A guy named Manoj Jain—

JH: I remember him.

JM: Had developed a wound treatment, collagen or something, it was supposed to be the next big thing.

JH: Yes.

JM: And Kansas had a stake in it.

JH: The State of Kansas had a stake in it.

JM: That's right. We were doing a lot of stories, and it turned out he was a bit of a charlatan, and the thing wasn't what he claimed that it would be. But there were a lot of state officials who were rather embarrassed by getting on the bandwagon.

JH: Right.

JM: So, I wrote a bunch of stories. It angered—

JH: Is this the one where the senator—

JM: Yes.

JH: Who pointed me out after criticizing you?

JM: Yes, Senator Dave Kerr of the Ways and Means Committee, it's at the end of the session.

JH: I never liked that.

JM: They were doing the omnibus bill, and you and I would go—there was a little heat register right behind the Senate conferees, and you and I would sit there right with proximity and report. We came in one day, and he had put a blue velvet rope up around where we were going to sit, and he told you it was fine for you to come back, but I couldn't sit there.

JH: What I remember him was singling you out and then saying something nice about me.

JM: Right, and I had to go sit in the gallery, and you got this preferred spot.

JH: Yes.

JM: That made me mad, John. You didn't stand up for me there. I'm just kidding you.

JH: I know.

JM: You and I, I still remember you and I going and knocking on doors during all the Westar stuff.

JH: Yes, and [Dave] Wittig [former CEO of Westar Energy] and [Douglas] Lake [former vice president of Westar Energy], I was just reminiscing about—

JM: Doug Lake, we went to his house, and he wasn't home.

JH: That's right. Were you in court the day that Julie Robinson, still on the federal bench as senior judge, this came up the other day because there were some lawyers who have been pulled before her in a lawsuit that deals with AI-generated citations not being correct allegedly, and she wants them to show cause why they shouldn't be sanctioned. Were you there the day in court like the criminal trial? It was David Wittig and Doug Lake, and Julie Robinson overruled—Doug Lake had this attorney from New York.

JM: Of course, he did.

JH: And she overruled him and he sighed audibly.

JM: She wasn't having it.

JH: She wasn't having it. She was like, "Oh, no, you will not do that in my courtroom. You will show respect." She dressed him down for a good five minutes.

JM: We could go on and on about those things.

JH: That was a most interesting court hearing. Yes, stuff like that. I remember—I saw a lot of political events. The abortion amendment in 2022, that was an amazing and somewhat unexpected margin. That was really interesting because it had such national consequences.

JM: You've covered a lot of—

JH: Oh, yes.

JM: First impressions. You already talked about little about Joan Finney. Just first impressions of Mike Hayden, Governor Mike Hayden.

JH: You know, he seemed more conservative at the time than he probably really was. In context, his brand of conservatism and what is now—the party has moved more to the right. He had, I think, this really interesting issue of trying to manage the legislature and getting what he wanted. He had this idea that he wanted—he was the guy who gave us the multi-year transportation plan.

JM: That's right. It fell to him to implement some of the Constitutional amendments, including those—

JH: That's right.

JM: The tax, the reapportionment.

JH: Yes, and I think both he and John Carlin got blamed for that, whatever went—I was talking with somebody today about property taxes and laughing that if you want to get 10,000 angry, screaming people on the south lawn with pitchforks and torches, big property tax increases are the best way to do it.

JM: When I think of Mike Hayden, I, of course, think of his voice.

JH: Yes.

JM: He had this commanding, twangy voice.

JH: Yes.

JM: But I also remember when he was the chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, and he would be getting ready to negotiate the omnibus bill, the big budget bill.

JH: The big catch-all budget.

JM: For the severance tax in this case.

JH: Yes, the severance tax.

JM: He would book these small committee rooms where people would have to pack in. He would show up, sit down, put his Red Man chewing tobacco right next to him. That was the sign, “We’re going to start negotiating, now.”

JH: Yes. I just remember him as governor of those years, and then Joan Finney won, and she was very different.

JM: She served four years.

JH: She served four years and then Bill Graves and Kathleen Sebelius.

JM: Bill Graves was just a nice person.

JH: He was.

JM: He didn’t have any huge policy initiatives over his eight years. He just kind of steered the ship of state. He was at the helm when the Republican Party started to move precipitously to the right.

JH: Yes, they started to go pretty much to the right, and there was a lot of conflict. He actually had some conflicts with Republican leaders in the Legislature.

JM: And then Kathleen Sebelius. I remember, was it a picture of you and Kathleen Sebelius where you could still go out on the House floor?

JH: Oh, yes.

JM: She was in the House at the time.

JH: She was. She'd worked for the Department of Corrections. When they authorized the new prison in El Dorado, it's now not the new prison in El Dorado, but it was—it's old now. In 1989, she was their go-to person on corrections. You would want her out there. You can't do this anymore. You could wander out there—

JM: On the House floor.

JH: On the House floor, and you weren't supposed to be there when they were taking a recorded vote. What you would do is drop down and wait for the vote to pass. Then you'd pop back up. Now, of course, we're in the House. We're in the back of the chamber, and in the Senate, you get in only to shoot pictures. So, that is a change.

JM: You're kneeling before Kathleen Sebelius.

JH: Oh, I'm not going to tell that story.

JM: Didn't she have some sort of comment, John?

JH: I know, but really, no, no. No, no.

JM: Go back to Lew Ferguson. You talked about the changing criteria from where you'd be allowed in the Chamber or not. When they first started making us wear these badges with our pictures on them and so forth, I remember Lew objecting to it. He made a big one.

JH: I've still got it. I framed it.

JM: He would not go on the floor. He sat up in the gallery and just taunted everybody. Do you remember that?

JH: I do. I have the thing he made or whoever made it, I have it.

JM: Who else could do that but him?

JH: Who else could do that but him? Yes.

JM: Bill Graves and Kathleen Sebelius and then Mark Parkinson who finished her term and then Sam Brownback.

JH: Sam Brownback was interesting. He was really interesting. He was going to take the state—he did take the state in a different policy direction.

JM: He thought we were going to be a national trendsetter.

JH: He did.

JM: We were going to be emblematic of red state America.

JH: Really a hard shift to the right, which I don't think he would think was a bad thing. There was a lot to write about.

JM: It's interesting. I want to ask you this question because I have my own opinion, but I want to know yours. Do you think he ever really understood the backlash that came his way? To me, he always seemed a little bit taken aback by it like he didn't really see it coming.

JH: I don't know that he did. I have not had the chance to talk to him about it. I can't tell you. I think my read from the interviews, from the talking, the reporting at the time was that there was an expectation the first year out there might be an issue, and then they would have to come back and fill in the gaps. His original tax-cutting plan had pay-fors in it so that it wouldn't cause—.

JM: Not only pay-fors. He said over time that it was going to result in more revenue, right.

JH: Right, but the point was, there wasn't—his original, original plan, at least the projections weren't for a big budget gap.

JM: Right.

JH: Then, of course, the process, they passed—basically the shot of adrenaline to the heart of the economy, this uber tax cut. But, of course, almost immediately, the next year, they knew they had to come in and deal with the budget. He was trying to get the pay-fors.

JM: Do you remember that? There was an existing sales tax that was getting ready to expire.

JH: Right, and they kept that.

JM: Governor Brownback, he couldn't before—he didn't want to be seen as being for renewing it. Do you remember that? So, he wasn't publicly out front for it, but he knew that he needed the revenue. So, he got a lot of Republicans to do his bidding. A lot of moderate Republicans, I remember that vote on one of the final days of the session. They voted to extend that sales tax.

JH: You kept just seeing these budget gaps continually, bigger and bigger. It really seemed to hit right at the 2014 election.

JM: I think he really thought that was going to work. I just saw him being perplexed when the problem started.

JH: And there are still arguments over why what happened happened. I think he would argue there were some economic factors and other things. I know there are people who argue that the problem was the exemption in income [tax] for LLCs. In other words, the pass-through income that the owner of an LLC collects being exempt and the argument being that was almost impossible to predict or estimate. I think obviously conservatives would tell you that he just wasn't strong enough about cutting spending. Now, of course, the people whose spending did get cut would argue with that.

It did not—afterwards, you would have examples of Republican governors—Nikki Haley [South Carolina] literally said, “Yes, we're going to cut taxes, but we're not going to make the mistakes that Kansas did.”

JM: So, we did become a national story, but not the way that Governor Brownback wanted.

JH: And who knows if it had worked out differently?

JM: Right. We've had the last several years Laura Kelly, of course, now well into her second term, about ready to finish her second term. She's a very different kind of governor. She's just kind of managing things again. She's wanted Medicaid expansion since the day she took office. She's not going to get it, apparently.

JH: It does not appear so. She has this very dry sense of humor.

JM: Yes, she does.

JH: It will be interesting to see what happens going forward, but this governor's race, Kansas has this fifty-year tendency of going from one party to the other after two terms.

JM: No Democrat has won after—

JH: But the other thing that's interesting is Jeff Colyer who was governor for a year after Sam Brownback went to take this ambassadorial post, he's trying to come back. Historically, that's not been something that's happened.

JM: All bets are off this year.

JH: All bets are off. The one thing we learned with Donald Trump as president, not president, president again is that politics can be pretty volatile and interesting and things can change dramatically.

JM: It can be said I think pretty fairly that we're in uncharted waters politically.

JH: In a lot of ways, we are.

JM: John, I can't tell you—it's been so much fun talking to you.

JH: Yes, it's been fun doing this.

JM: Thanks for doing this. I really appreciate it.

JH: I appreciate it. It's just I don't know if that's an appropriate story to tell.

JM: All right. The dean of the Statehouse Press Corps, John Hanna. Thank you very much.

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