

Interview of Senator Audrey Langworthy by Joan Wagnon, October 18, 2019
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Joan Wagnon: Today is October 18th, about 2:30 in the afternoon, 2019, and we're in the Senate Chambers of the Kansas State House of Topeka, Kansas. I'm Joan Wagnon, former legislator and board member of the Kansas Oral History Project. I'll be interviewing Senator Audrey Langworthy about her service in the legislature. Mrs. Langworthy served from 1985 to 2001 in the Senate, representing District 7 in Prairie Village. Is that right?

Audrey Langworthy: Correct.

JW: My little note says that you were preceded by Senator Norman Gaar, who had been there a long time, and you defeated him. You were succeeded by [Representative] David Adkins.

AL: Correct.

JW: You stayed for a while. Your political party is Republican, and you've been in Johnson County for a very long time. Is that correct?

AL: That's all correct.

JW: The Oral History Project is a not-for-profit corporation created to interview former legislators, and we make these interviews accessible to researchers and educators through the Kansas City Historical Society. This will be posted on Kansas Memory. David Heinemann who is a former member of the Kansas House and board member of the Oral History Project is our videographer. Transcriptions of the interviews are funded by a grant from Humanities Kansas.

Audrey, in the early 1990s, two historians from Washburn interviewed almost all of the women legislators. I believe your interview may have been done by Barbara Burgess.

AL: I think so. We went to kindergarten together and all the way through high school.

JW: I read it, and it's just a wonderful interview. I've given you a copy of it, and you can do what you want with it. We'll be sure that when this interview is posted, it will also contain the earlier one so people can see how things have changed in the last thirty years.

I thought your interview was a really fascinating description of how you ran and campaigned and why you did it, and what your life was like before, and what it's been like since. How did you decide to take on Norman Gaar? He was a lion in the Senate, or maybe "lion" is not the right word. He was sometimes a "bad boy."

AL: Well, somehow I got convinced that he was a bad boy and that it was time for a change. That was my mantra. He'd been there for twenty years and had lost contact with his constituency because he was such a lion, nobody wanted to take him on. He had been unopposed. In 1984, when I first worked for Jan when she ran for the US Senate.

JW: [Senator] Jan Meyers.

AL: Jan Meyers. I worked for her in the primary. She lost to [US Senator] Nancy Kassebaum. The next day I was asked to work for Nancy. I thought, "I'm still mourning Jan." But afterwards I did. We were co-chairs at Prairie Village. But the point of what I'm saying is that Jan Meyers beat Norman Gaar in his own Senate district, which was a clue that he was vulnerable. That was my major encouragement that I should go for the seat. I will say I ran scared a lot. [laughs] It motivated me to go door to door every day because I thought, "I cannot lose. I cannot lose. I can't imagine facing losing." It just forced me to work really hard.

JW: Didn't you learn something though, going door to door about the district and Norman Gaar and yourself?

AL: Oh, I did.

JW: What were those lessons?

AL: Well, first of all, I learned that most people didn't know who Norman Gaar was because he hadn't had to campaign, and I live in an area where there is a great deal of turnover. People move in; they move out. There's not a stable constituency necessarily. It's become more stable now.

At any rate, I will say that going door to door was the most calming time of my campaign. If I was at home or something, my stomach was churning. But when I went door to door and for the most part other than having a few near dog bites and a few other scary knocks—I went to a screen door one day, and a nude man ran across the hall. I mean, there were funny things. But going door to door, people were really nice, and you do learn what they feel is important and what you should be working on.

JW: I think almost everybody that's gone door to door has had a nude man at some point at the door saying, "Excuse me," or whatever you say to a naked man. Well, that was quite the experience in Prairie Village. Has the District changed very much?

AL: It has gotten a little bit larger because of the change in population. Also in this last election, we elected more Democrats in this district. It's always been, I considered, the most moderate of all the counties in the state. I could enjoy being a real true moderate there without worrying about "Was I offending people?" Of course, the issue that always offends people most is whether you're pro-life or pro-choice. Even back then, it wasn't the issue that it became.

JW: But it was an important issue for you, if I'm recalling your earlier interview.

AL: I hated to stand up on the Senate floor and defend being pro-choice when pro-life bills were introduced, but there weren't very many people willing to stand up. I kind of had to work myself into getting a little bit tough about it, but there weren't enough voices, and all these bills

were coming from men, which I never understood. Well, I do understand, sort of. To me, it's just so sad that it's still such a dominant issue when I don't think it deserves the time and attention that children and families and prisons and so on, all the other social issues that we should be spending time on, especially children and foster care and so on.

JW: And those issues don't go away. They keep recycling. You've dealt with those during your time in the legislature, and they're back on the front burner all over again.

AL: Yes.

JW: The district has become a little more Democratic, a little more moderate in terms of its views. You've seen that change, which reflects people's attitudes. How did you change? You spent sixteen years in the Senate. You had to have changed. How did that happen?

AL: I like to think that I didn't change, and the world changed around me, but that's not necessarily true.

JW: Well, you grew more self-assured.

AL: I grew more self-assured. I had always considered myself a conservative on fiscal issues and a social moderate. Over time, I realized that maybe I wasn't as fiscally conservative as some of the people coming in after me, that I was a fiscal moderate at best.

JW: All of our definitions certainly changed. That's for sure.

AL: That's right.

JW: Did you notice any difference in campaigning in later years? Do you still go door to door regardless? I realize you haven't done it for a while.

AL: Actually I did it for a friend in 2016, our state rep[Representative] Melissa Rooker. She's one of the casualties, and she lost. She was a fabulous state rep. So I did get back into going door to door because I just couldn't believe she could lose.

JW: Because things change. People's attitudes change and that partisanship.

AL: I hate to get too partisan here, but I think it was an anti-Trump in my area, and they were voting against all Republicans.

JW: Yes. Let's talk about some committees that you served on. I'm always amazed at how many committees you can manage. In the House, we only usually had three, and that was manageable. But you started out in '85. When you came in, you were one of three—

AL: Republicans.

JW: Republican women. There were a couple of Democrats. Was Norma Daniels—

AL: Norma Daniels and Nancy Parrish.

JW: So there were five women out of forty. They put you on Local Government as the chair.

AL: Vice chair.

JW: You had been a City Council person.

AL: Right.

JW: And you pretty much stayed on Education. I guess the Judiciary seat you had must have been Norman Gaar's.

AL: Probably. It probably was. I was on Judiciary my first four years, and it was very educational, but I thought, "There's no future. I'm not an attorney. I need to ask to get off and get on something that I can make more of a difference."

JW: And you moved to Tax.

AL: And I moved to Tax.

JW: Tell me how you got interested in assessment and taxation.

AL: Well, I didn't really know I was interested. Bud Burke, who must have been majority leader—

JW: Must have been majority leader, yes.

AL: I think suggested that that would be a good place for me. I said, "I don't know anything about tax. It would be kind of interesting." I loved it.

JW: I think at one point, you and I were both chairs of Tax.

AL: Right.

JW: Two women, one Democrat and one Republican, and that was pretty unusual then.

AL: It was.

JW: And Ruth Wilkin, I don't know if you remember Ruth—

AL: I do remember her.

JW: She served in the House, and she told me once that everybody wants to go to Ways and Means and spend money. Where you need to be is the Tax Committee because that's where all the action is, and I think you saw that in your time. Tell me a little bit about your experience on the Tax Committee and as chairman.

AL: I don't remember so much about being vice chair except that I thought, "I'd better learn as much as I can because I might, could be Tax Chair." But I did in the very beginning rely on and I hate to admit it, but I did kind of rely on the Tax staff to educate me.

JW: That's pretty normal. All of us did that.

AL: "Come into my office, and let's go over these bills." I would ask them questions and so on. It really served me very well to have that support. I didn't always do what they thought I should do. I mean, I had co-conspirators. If you remember, there was a tax bill called the trifecta.

JW: Oh, yes, I do.

AL: I was advised that that might not even be constitutional. With the support of leadership, we did it anyway. But Don Hayward [Revisor of Statutes office] would have had conniptions sometimes as the attorney for the legislature.

JW: He was not shy about coming in and saying, "You can't possibly think about doing that."

AL: Absolutely, and I loved him for it.

JW: Absolutely. Like many people who served in the legislature, this was a big learning experience for you. Is that an accurate statement?

AL: Yes. In fact in the beginning, when people were asking me after I got elected, "What's it like?" I said, "It's like going to college. I go to my 8:00 class and learn about Energy and Natural Resources. Then I go to my 10:00 one, which is Public Health and Welfare. Then I go to like the Tax Committee. In the afternoon, I go to Education, and I'm just learning all day all this new information."

I think there's a reason that—I've been always glad that Kansas doesn't have term limits because it took me really eight years to feel confident. It was my last eight that were the most satisfying because I knew how to get things done and so on. I've always felt that term limits were bad for women because a lot of men seem to have a way of pushing themselves, in asserting themselves into leadership positions, and women tend to sit back and listen and learn

before they push themselves ahead. I always looked at the Missouri legislature, and I thought, "They only get two terms in the Senate, and then you're out." It just didn't make sense for women.

JW: I never supported term limits for the same reason. It puts a lot more power in the hands of staff.

AL: It definitely does.

JW: They control the flow of information.

AL: Right. The Kansas legislature, I've seen something, the average time that people are in the House are like nine years. The Senate may be two terms even. [Senator Anthony] Tony Hensley is skewing the average, but—

JW: Yes, he is.

AL: People seem to have removed themselves, and I felt like after sixteen years, I didn't want to be Norman Gaar and have somebody run against me after I'd been there twenty years and say it's time for a change. So I got out after sixteen, "got out," decided to retire.

JW: Sure. No, I understand. Now I'm trying to figure this out. You worked with four different governors. Is that right?

AL: Yes.

JW: John Carlin, Mike Hayden, Joan Finney, and Bill Graves.

AL: Correct.

JW: And you left before Kathleen Sebelius became governor.

AL: Yes. I was wishing I could stay on for two more years to finish out with Bill Graves. That would have been satisfying, but the Senate terms don't coincide with governor terms.

JW: No, they do not.

AL: I finished at the beginning of 2001, and then Kathleen was elected in '02.

JW: 1985 to 1994. That was the first eight years that you were there. It stands out in my mind, when I go through all the clips and look at what the legislature actually passed. They passed liquor-by-the-drink.

AL: Oh, yes.

JW: Dick Bond said that was the best piece of legislation we ever passed.

AL: It was the first really big bill that I voted on.

JW: Economic development. Do you remember all the Krider, Redwood—

AL: Yes, the Krider-Redwood report.

JW: You had a comprehensive highway plan. That was Mike Hayden's. You had a water plan.

AL: Right.

JW: Do you remember Gus Bogina flying in here in the hospital bed?

AL: Yes, I do remember that.

JW: Saving the water plan. You had school finance, property classification, tax reform, mental health reform, prisons and sentencing reform, and the death penalty. Which of those issues or any of them stand out in your mind as things that were important for the state and did you work on them?

AL: I worked on several of them. I didn't work on the death penalty, but it was a very emotional issue to the extent that I got several threats in letters. I'd go to my colleagues, Gus Bogina and Bud Burke and Dick Bond. Men didn't get threats. I will say that's I think a difference. They were all men who felt they could threaten a woman in the legislature. In the end, it was determined that I should take these letters to the KBI. Nothing ever came of any of them, but I did, and it was over the death penalty.

JW: Oh, my.

AL: Now I've forgotten all the other issues. The highway plan, I carried the 1999—

JW: Yes, that was the '99 plan. That was Graves's plan.

AL: I carried that bill in the Senate floor. It was in Transportation. At that time, we had this influx of conservatives. A lot of the conservatives got put on the Transportation Committee, and they couldn't get a bill out of the committee. So Dick Bond, as Senate president, moved the Transportation bill to the Tax Committee.

JW: And that's how it came out.

AL: And that's how it came out.

JW: You were chairing the Tax Committee. I'll be darned.

AL: It was a big bill.

JW: I read a lot of the clips. You remember we used to get legislative clips.

AL: I love clips.

JW: I read a lot of those end-of-session summaries. It seemed like up until about '94, there were just a lot of productivity in the legislature. There were strong leaders, both women and men. When you got to '94 or '95, when the conservatives started coming in, there was just a couple of years there that not much happened. Then Bill Graves started producing more legislation, and things started happening again, and we went back to a much more balanced structure. Does that jibe with what you remember?

AL: Yes. Those of us who were here, it started in '92 and then more in '94 when there was a concerted conservative movement, we were all taken aback, I think, that there wasn't cooperation within our own party. Suddenly instead of we, as a Republican Senate, could push through legislation, suddenly there were all these people who didn't what we thought was the Republican agenda. They were anti-tax and anti-everything, it sort of seemed.

JW: And a lot of discussion of abortion bills went on during that time, a lot of controversy, I guess.

AL: Right. It amazed me that, when I came in as a freshman, we all kind of were quiet the first year, sat back and listened. Those that came in, the conservatives in the nineties, they'd stand up on the Senate floor the first day of the session if they had something to say. It was just, "Who do you think you are?" They were much more assertive.

JW: In [Senate Majority Leader] Lana Oleen's interview on Monday, she said they challenged the decorum of the Senate.

AL: What a great way to describe it.

JW: That was a real pull and push, wasn't it, between people who were doing things differently. What do you think about how the Senate functions now? How would you function in today's Senate? You still know the tax issues.

AL: I still know the tax issues. I would not fit in this current climate. I would probably be an outsider. I might be like Barbara Bollier and become a Democrat. She certainly was put in the

back of the bus and tried to be rendered ineffective. She had too strong a voice. Becoming a Democrat gave her back her voice.

I remember when [Senator] Frank Gaines, who was a wonderful Democrat senator and had a great way about him, when he retired, somebody asked him why he was retiring, and he said, "Too many women." That offended me at first. I thought about it, and I thought, "No, his way of life, the good old boy life, when the world was changing, and he had run his time." I think we all know when we have kind of run our time. I didn't want to end up being ineffective. I wanted to go out when I still was effective.

JW: I've got a couple of questions about gender before I move on. Did you ever consider running for a leadership position like president of the Senate? I mean, the Tax Committee, in and of itself, is a leadership position.

AL: I realized I was in the best position I was going to be. That's because I had—Johnson County could only have so much leadership. I had Bud Burke before me who had been majority leader and then Senate president, and then Dick Bond jumped in as Senate president. There was no way I could even be vice president of the Senate because we were all from the same county. I thought, "You know, Tax chair is perfect. I'm going to go out in the best leadership position I can get."

JW: I thought it was pretty perfect. I want to read you a long statement here. "Personal identity is loosely defined as gender, age, race, class, sexual or gender orientation, and marital status." In other words, we're defined by so many different things. Did you experience a time in your legislative work where you believe your personal identity influenced your ability to pass policy or work with fellow legislators or constituents?

AL: Oh, definitely. I had gotten a master's degree out of school. I was an educator, but I got a master's degree in educational psychology and guidance. I never was a guidance counselor, but I always felt I used my educational psychology in the Senate. I think what sets women apart is they are more sensitive, compassionate, caring, and for the most part, have less ego than a lot of men. So when it comes to public health and welfare issues, education and so on, I think women bring a slightly different feel towards it. They want what's good for the children and for the poor, for those in prison. It's less about "We need to cut this because there's too many people on welfare. They need to either get jobs, or they're not going to get any help" mentality. That's just not the way women think. I still advocate for 50/50, but we don't seem to be getting there very fast.

JW: Well, we did really well. From 1918, when [Representative] Minnie Grinstead got elected from Liberal, Kansas until about 1970, there were never more than four women in either the Senate or the House. Then Jan Meyers and Ruth Wilkin and that group of women in the seventies doubled their numbers, and it doubled again in the eighties, and it doubled again in

the nineties. It's kind of leveled off to where somewhere around 27, 28 percent of the membership is female.

AL: Right.

JW: They're not all the same. Their views are different. You can look at the current president of the Senate [Susan Wagle] who is a woman, who has many of the characteristics you described and many different policy positions. It's been fascinating for me to watch the change and try to understand.

AL: Right. I certainly would differ with the current Senate president on many, many issues.

JW: Yes, me, too. So as you look back on your time in the legislature, what are you most proud of?

AL: I was proud that I felt like I made a difference in those years, and that we were able to do some really good things, especially in the nineties—well, I suppose in the eighties, but I had more of an influence in the nineties. I felt like we were there for the right reasons, which was good government and helping, doing what government is supposed to do.

My own personal first bill was designating the Oregon Trail through Kansas. That was from my friend, Barbara Burgess, who lived on a farm in Wamego, and the trail went through her property. That was a very good learning experience to introduce a bill and then defend it. I had a little trouble from a few House members who thought the trail started in their House district and so on, but for the most part, it was a good experience, and I got to help. The National Park Service had just made official signs. I got to be at the dedication and put up the first sign in Johnson County at about 123rd Street. To this day, when I'm driving through Kansas and seeing those signs, it's a good feeling. It was a nice bill to begin my career with.

My most satisfying though is the Bi-state Cultural District bill.

JW: Tell me about that.

AL: It came to me from Kansas City Consensus that we needed a bi-state tax from the Kansas side and the Missouri side to fund important—it was like for the symphony and the Nelson Art Gallery and so on. That's how it was envisioned. Boy, was that a hard sell. In fact, I took the bill to Fred Kerr who was then Tax chair, and he wouldn't even introduce it, which in hindsight, after I learned more, I thought it was always a courtesy that you introduce—

JW: It was supposed to be a courtesy.

AL: He thought it was too far out. He didn't want any Kansas tax dollars flowing into Missouri. So that was a really hard sell. Then I finally after a couple of years—it took five or six years to

get that bill passed. In part sometimes the help I wanted from the House, there were a few that wanted to tinker with it, but I finally got Dick Bond on board, and that was very helpful because he's persuasive. Then I got Gus Bogina, but they had all been, and Bud Burke. It got through a conference committee at midnight one year about '91 or '92. It hasn't done what it was originally set out to do. It did redo Union Station on the Kansas City/Missouri side, which was crumbling and falling down at the time. A good committee of bi-state people put together a committee to get on both sides of the state line passed that. I see pictures or I pass Union Station, and it makes me proud. I spent five years working on that bill.

JW: That's good. They have great exhibits there.

AL: Yes. They do. Again, it wasn't exactly what it had initially been thought to be, but it certainly has served a wonderful purpose.

JW: When you left the legislature, what did you do? You've figured out that you'd been here sixteen years. You didn't want to get beaten. You'd done what you came to do. What did you do next?

AL: Oh, gosh. I kind of fell back into my old life of volunteering at home on the Red Cross, the hospital board.

JW: Community service.

AL: Community service.

JW: Nothing wrong with that.

AL: No.

JW: But you still maintain an interest in what goes on down here, it would appear.

AL: Oh, yes, I do, very much.

JW: And you're serving now with Governor Kelly's Tax Reform Task Force. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

AL: Yes, that has been—well, first of all, I was honored when I got a call from the governor's office asking if I would be interested. They didn't offer me the job. They asked if I would be interested, and I said, "Oh, yes." I said, "I may have forgotten a lot, but we did good things in the nineties, and many of them have been undone." I said it would be a nice opportunity to see under Governor Kelly if we could kind of right the ship a little bit.

We've had two sets of meetings, and we're inching towards making some tough recommendations. We're only going to make preliminary recommendations in December for the legislature, and then we will continue to meet next year. So far it's been totally stimulating and interesting, and I thought, "Oh, I'm back, maybe making a little difference again." It's a nice feeling.

I will have to say, in terms of my life, the legislature provided me with the best opportunity to feel like I was doing something very productive. I'm sure you can feel—

JW: I feel the same. I feel exactly the same. It was—at a time that there weren't that many opportunities other than volunteer work at things. So it was good.

I was really glad to see that you were on that. There were several reports that have come out over the years with respect to tax policy that have been significant. One of them was the Hodge Report, when your husband's grandfather was chairing the Tax Committee as a Democrat and completely overhauled the whole underpinning of tax in Kansas. The Hodge Report, which we studied several times, looked at that concept of the three-legged stool, the balance between property, sales, and income.

Then the Graves Tax Reform Commission came back in '95 and renewed that and reasserted that that's the best policy. I think it was just unfortunate that Governor Brownback never seemed to read that.

AL: No, he didn't.

JW: He just did not understand what it took to make a stable tax system. I'm glad that Governor Kelly is pulling you all back in, and you'll be channeling George Hodges maybe.

AL: There's a book on his career. I'm going to go pull it out and read that section.

JW: I'm saying that it's nice to see that you're back in a leadership role in helping to restore balance with respect to tax policy in Kansas, and I applaud you for that.

AL: Thank you. I hope we can make our voice heard. To me, it's a voice of reason and convince a divided legislature that a balanced tax policy, the three-legged stool, works.

JW: It does. Do you have any advice for other women who are planning to go into politics or serve in the legislature?

AL: I always encourage them to run because I think it's very helpful to have a woman's voice. We still need to encourage women because in the beginning, it can seem more daunting, I think, fundraising-wise and so on. When I first ran, I had a committee of men that were doing the asking for money, although I've gotten better at it over the years.

JW: I bet you have.

AL: Women need to be at the table. I'm always delighted. In fact, I just talked to a candidate now who is going to run for Barbara Bollier's seat. I'm encouraging her. She has some background. She's been a mayor of Mission. At any rate, my all-time favorite mentor was Nancy Kassebaum because I thought she was ideal. She was strong. She was smart, and she could charm all those men senators back in Washington. She was very, very effective.

JW: She was. She came recently to a centennial celebration the League of Women Voters had for their 100th anniversary of the passage of suffrage for women. She's their honorary chair. She is just as interesting as she's always been.

AL: Good. I haven't seen her for years.

JW: She's tiny still, maybe even tinier than she was before, but she's quite a powerhouse.

AL: Tiny, but, yes, a powerhouse.

JW: Well, Senator, thank you.

AL: Thank you.

JW: This has just been a whole lot of fun to talk to you.

AL: It's been great to reconnect with you, as former Tax Chairs together to reminisce here. It kind of fits in with the fact that I am on the governor's tax force. So it's been a real pleasure today.

JW: Thank you. I'm Joan Wagnon for the Kansas Oral History Project, and this has been an interview with Senator Audrey Langworthy of Prairie Village.

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