

Joan Wagnon: Hello, I'm Joan Wagnon. I'm a board member for the Kansas Oral History Project, and today I have with me Lee Hamm, a veteran legislator of twenty years from Pratt, Kansas. The Kansas Oral History Project was created to collect histories of Kansans who were involved in shaping and developing and implementing public policy. Recordings and transcripts of these oral history interviews are accessible to researchers, educators, and other members of the public through the Kansas Historical Society, the State Library of Kansas, and, of course, our website, ksoralhistory.org. The project is supported by donations from individuals.

Today, Mr. Lee Hamm was elected to the Kansas House of Representatives in 1972, and he served for twenty years. Mr. Hamm gave us this information about himself: Lee Hamm, born June 27, 1929. That makes you ninety-six years old today. You graduated from Isabel High School in 1947. You are a dairy man, a farmer from 1948 to 2004. You've served on the school board of Glendale and now Pratt School District. You were in the legislature, and you have been the director of the Kansas Grain Department. Now, that's Kansas Grain Inspection, wasn't it?

Lee Hamm: Kansas Grain Inspection Department, yes.

JW: And that was an appointment by Governor Joan Finney, is that right?

LH: Yes, it was.

JW: So, from '92 to '95, you inspected grains in the state and made sure that we followed rules and so forth.

LH: Right.

JW: You retired and moved to Pratt in 2004. You married Darlene Armstrong in 1949. She died in 2007. And you have three children, Roger, Ann and Mark. Does that sound correct?

LH: That is correct.

JW: Let's start this by talking a little bit about your background. Since you were born in 1929, you would have been a very small child during the Depression. But like most people, I'm sure you have good stories about the Depression, whether they came from your parents or neighbors or your own observations. Could you tell me a little what it was like to grow up in rural Kansas during the Depression?

LH: Thank you. Most of what I remember is what I myself remember. I don't remember my folks talking about it very much. But I grew up on the farm, nine miles southeast of Pratt. I was born in the house we lived in. The doctor came out from Sawyer, Dr. Bucklin, and he attended my mother and my birth, and it was the 27th of June in the middle of harvest. My dad was out of the house, harvesting. They had to go out and tell him that he had a new boy. And the interesting thing about it is, they say it was a week before they had a name for me because they were so busy in harvesting.

JW: Any other remembrances?

LH: We had very little money back in the thirties, as I remember. A lot of people had the same problem we did. I remember as a kid, we had two boys in the family besides me, and when we went to town on Saturday—the folks went to town. We were allowed occasionally to go to town. I would get a dime, and I could go to Gardener Grocery Store on Third Street east of Main and buy two candy bars with that dime. I was really going good if I did that.

As I remember the farm, it pretty well sustained itself. We had a garden to supply the vegetables. We butchered our own beef and hogs for meat. We had chickens for eggs and meat. We milked cows for the cream and butter and milk. As far as eating was concerned, we didn't lack that.

I can remember my dad telling about some railroad people back at that time who were having a hard time making a living. They would come out and hunt cottontails to help with their food supply.

I remember the 1929 Chevrolet sedan that we had as the family car. Dad had an old Model A truck at that time. I could remember him taking that with a load of cattle to the Wichita Stockyard Exchange occasionally.

My dad did nothing but work. He was the oldest boy in a family of twelve. If there was any work to be done on the farm, he had to stay home and help. He figured he ended up with about a sixth-grade education. In his later years, you wouldn't know that because he seemed to be educated pretty well.

I was brought up in the church. The family went to church every Sunday. I was baptized into Christ when I was fourteen years old. I feel like God and Christ are still important as far as my life is concerned.

My dad never went to church with us until after Mother died. He realized the importance of salvation at that time, and he was baptized into Christ at a late date. So, we are thankful for that.

But our house was just a four-room house, two bedrooms upstairs, and a kitchen and a living room downstairs. We had a pot-bellied stove that burned coal and wood. We didn't have any electric lights. We didn't have any bathroom. The house was heated by coal and wood. In 1935, Dad added on to the house, built another room. We had an upstairs and downstairs. When he built that house, he dug a line over to the gas line that ran to the Kansas Power gas line in our pasture, and he hooked it up to that gas line, and after that, we had gas lights, a gas refrigerator, and, of course, a gas stove in the kitchen, and we heated the house by gas after that, but we still did not have any electricity.

I also remember the WPA, the Works Progress Administration that President Roosevelt established in the mid-thirties some time. They were putting in shelterbelts and Dad had two

shelterbelts¹ established on our farm at that time. They have been a great boon as far as Kansas was concerned. There was a lot of them established.

They also built outhouses. We had an outhouse put in at our place. After we got that new outhouse, we really thought we were something. And that's about it as far as my growing-up ideas are concerned.

JW: What about your grandfather, your great-grandfather? You told me that he was—

LH: My grandfather John Magreffin lived out in Haskell County for a while. He had the family out there. They had a hard time. They really struggled. I remember there was a place out there called Ivanhoe at that time. He was the postmaster of Ivanhoe at one time. He also dug water wells, traveled, walking many miles to put in new wells for people. They had a store for a little while, but after all that folded up, then they came back by covered wagon over land, and they settled here in Pratt County. The Magreffins and the Hamms lived about a mile apart. That's the reason that my dad and my mother got together.

JW: He was also in the legislature in the early 1900s, you thought?

LH: Yes, one of his daughters wrote a report that told about him being elected to the Kansas legislature from Haskell County. He could go up there and express his opinion, but as I understood it, he could not vote. He did not have a vote for any of the projects that were coming up.

JW: That's unusual. I'm going to have to do some research about why he couldn't vote. That's a pretty good story. I appreciate that. I want to move you forward in time if that's okay. You graduated from Isabel High School in 1947. One of the things that we're interested in at the Oral History Project is public education. What was it like in a rural school? Tell me about your education and schooling.

LH: I graduated from high school in '47. I was in high school during World War II. It was hard to get teachers at that present time. Some of the teachers we had probably weren't the best, but we did manage to get an education at that time.

I was interested in sports. The only sports that Isabel High had was baseball and basketball, and I was involved in both of those. I never was really outstanding, but I enjoyed them very much.

As far as the other things, I was involved in the class play. I was the leader in that play, if I remember right. I had Glee Club and also sang in a quartet. So, I got to be involved in the Isabel High School.

It was a class of sixteen.

¹ The Great Plains Shelterbelt program was initiated by President Roosevelt in 1934 to reduce significant soil erosion caused by severe dust storms of the Dust Bowl.

JW: Yeah, but you met your wife in school, and you all got married very soon.

LH: What I was trying to say, she was the salutatorian in the class, and I was #4 out of that class of sixteen.

JW: That's good to know. Did you just generally understand that when you got out of high school, you were going to go into farming?

LH: Yes, I think so. I was tired of going to school. I thought I was going to farm. I didn't see any sense in—Dad gave me a choice. I could either go to Pratt Community College, or I could get me a car. So, you know what I got was the car.

JW: I know that young men like those sorts of things. When did you marry Darlene? What year did you get married? You graduated in '47.

LH: We got married in 1949.

JW: And you stayed at home and worked on the farm, but at some point, you got interested in public service. I think you served on the Glendale school board for a while. Was Isabel High School in the Glendale area?

LH: Isabel is in Barber County. We were nine miles from Isabel and nine miles from Pratt. We could go either way. Since we were going to church at Isabel, I had two older sisters. Glendale also had two years of high school when they were going to school. My sisters both went two years at Glendale, and my oldest sister went to Isabel to high school where she stayed with an aunt for one year, and then she drove the last year as I understood it. My other sister and a cousin, and they rented an apartment in Pratt and went to high school here in Pratt. My brother Warren who was six years older than I was when he graduated, he chose to go to Isabel. So, he did, and the rest of us boys, Warren, Dale, and I all went to Isabel to high school.

JW: One of the things that interested me about your career and your various activities was the fact that you were one of the few people that is still around that remembers what went on 1965 or '66 in Kansas when they decided to consolidate schools. This is the information that I found. Kansas had almost 2,800 school districts in the state during the 1950s. The legislature passed a bill that required unification of all of those small districts, 2,800 of them, but by 1965, the number of districts had reduced to about 300. Consolidation was a major controversy throughout the sixties, and even thirty years later, when you were in the legislature, when we changed the school finance formula in 1991 and again in 1992. So, what do you remember about school consolidation and its impact on education and the local communities?

LH: Consolidation was really a big deal in Pratt County. Pratt being the largest school in the county had extended an invitation to all of the schools to come and join them, and a lot of the rural people were a little bit leery of that because they were afraid with all that extra valuation in the land that they would come into their district that they would spend too much money.

So, Sawyer, Coats, Cullison, Byers-- all² went together and decided that they absolutely would not come to Pratt. They were going to form their own district. So, they built a school out on the west edge of Pratt, and Skyline [school district] is still there to this date, and some kids from Pratt go out to the Skyline School just because it's a smaller school. It has had pretty good success as far as that goes.

There were two towns, Preston and Iuka that did not consolidate with the people out west. They stayed, and later Glendale [school district] was the first school to consolidate with Pratt, and Preston and Iuka came in later. So, we consolidated there.

As far as I remember, the education didn't suffer a whole lot. More courses could be offered because the money was more available with the extra valuation. Really as far as Glendale was concerned, we felt like it was a good thing. My three children all went to high school at Pratt.

JW: It sounds like it worked out. I think about Shawnee County where I live in Topeka. We've got four rural school districts surrounding Topeka because they didn't want to come into the big city, into Topeka. So, people's feelings run pretty high about consolidation, don't you think?

LH: They did. Some people wouldn't speak to others because of it out here.

JW: I'm not surprised. I'd like to shift to a different topic, if that's okay. I want to talk about how you actually got into the politics of the state legislature. I'm sure there were some politicking going on to get you elected to either Glendale or the Pratt school boards, but those were I think you told me, three or five members [each]. But going to the legislature was a different deal. How did you decide that you wanted to run for public office?

LH: I had always held elected officials in esteem. I just wanted to be involved and try to help have good government as much as possible.

JW: Why did you decide to run as a Democrat and not a Republican?

LH: I had always been a Democrat. The Democratic Party had been more acceptable as far as the farmers were concerned. So, I was a good Democrat. The Democrats in Pratt County at that time had a women's organization that was probably the best one in the whole state. Anyway, they were real good. They helped in my election and several elections after that.

JW: Did you have any platform or any ideas about what you were going to be able to accomplish in the legislature or was it just a desire to be involved and to know what was going on?

LH: Well, if you remember, in '72, Watergate was involved in my election at that time.

JW: That's right.

² Kansas Highway map showing towns around Pratt available in attachments.

LH: I used that as something I could work on as far as better government.

JW: Good.

LH: Honest government. We used that in our campaign. I did the usual county fairs, newspaper ads, knocking on doors, having meetings, visiting with people. After the election, which was just a few votes difference between me and Loren Baker, I was very lucky to get elected at that time especially in Kansas as a [Democrat in a] Republican [state].

JW: Well, Kansas every now and then decides that it can host a few Democrats. But '72 was an interesting year when people who came in and by later in that decade, you [Democrats] even became the majority [party] in the House. Do you remember that?

LH: I remember that.

JW: John Carlin was elected speaker.

LH: John Carlin was the speaker of the House at that time. You talk about him later on, but we appreciated John appointing me as chairman of the House Transportation Committee at that time.

JW: Do you remember any issues you were dealing with with transportation?

LH: The big thing in transportation when I was chairman was the southeast Kansas Turnpike. They talked that around, up and down. Some southeast Kansas people wanted it, and some people didn't want it because they didn't want to have to pay to drive on the roads in Kansas. After it all boiled down, nothing was ever done about it, but later on, after the highway programs came in, they got their highways out there that satisfied them, I think.

JW: Yes. They've built some more roads like—is it 169 that goes south now that's serving that same purpose, four-lane roads to get into southeast Kansas.

LH: Yes.

JW: I am wanting to ask you, when you were on the Transportation Committee, when you first got elected, did you do anything spectacular on there? Was there an issue that you got involved in that maybe helped you cement your relationship with your constituents?

LH: Well, I can't remember who chaired that committee. I know [Rep.] Don Crumbaker was on that from northwest Kansas. The big thing then was the big utility companies were trying to force REA³ not to go into the big companies that were using a lot of electricity, that they wanted all of that. In committee, I spoke up. I talked about the big utility companies. The only one that we had out here was Pratt City itself. They had built an electric line three miles south of Pratt, seven miles east, four miles north of the Waldeck Elevator. All the farmers along that three-mile

³ Rural Electrification Administration was established by President Roosevelt in 1932 to help rural Americans access electricity and improve the quality of their lives.

line east had electricity, and the rest of us didn't have it, and there was no way we could get electricity because of that.

That was my point as far as the committee, and they accepted what I said, and the bill was never passed. They settled later. I'm not sure how it all ended, but I think the REA still got some big power, electricity users in line.

JW: Certainly delivering electricity to farms was a very important thing. I watched that in my own family. My dad was involved with the REA. Electricity, that was, you didn't have anything but gas for a while, did you?

LH: We didn't get electricity on our farm until 1946 after World War II when REA was able to begin putting them in again. So, you talk about a change. We had electricity. We could put in a bathroom. We had heat. The first thing Dad did was buy a Forney welder and hooked it on to the meter out at the pole. He could use the welder then. But you talk about all the power machines. It was a lot of money spent on new things when the REA came through.

JW: But it made all the difference in the world and in people's lives. Another issue I wanted to ask you about because our videographer here was very involved. He was in the legislature in the seventies when you were. What about women's rights? Did anybody pay any attention to that? Did you have ERA issues?

LH: I can't remember who the lady from Illinois was that was so opposed to the constitutional amendment on women's rights.

JW: Phyllis Schlafly?

LH: Right. Anyway, I supported her and her move. I gave testimony in committee that I thought it was a bad thing to do. What worried me was how it affected the family more than anything else. The women even after they got the women's rights by federal law, the women went to get to work, and the small children had to be put in daycare centers, and I think that's a poor way to have to raise children. Anyway, there was good and bad as far as the women's rights were concerned, and I did not like the fact that women would have to serve in the Army's services. I think there has been a lot of trouble through that even at the present time. I still don't think it was a good thing.

JW: Well, I guess that's one I would disagree with you on. One of the nice things about being in the legislature was that we could agree on one issue and disagree on another and still be supportive of making sure that government worked.

JW: I'm curious. Who did you admire when you were coming into politics? Who influenced you, whether it's local, state, or national?

LH: I don't think I had any special person as far as admiring them. I held those who were elected in a high position, but other than that, no. I don't think so.

JW: Okay. The seventies and the eighties were a time of big change in state government in Kansas. Have you noticed any major changes in the way that government works, how it was organized, particularly comparing it to the way that it is now or when you were in the legislature? You were there for twenty years from '72 to '92.

LH: I don't really have any ideas.

JW: Let me ask you about some governors. I think the governors were reformers in those areas. Robert Bennett, for example, was known for being an institutional reformer. He changed the structure of state government. He created Cabinet positions like social and rehabilitation services. He combined county welfare departments to be one state department. He put Dr. Robert Harder at the helm. Governor Bennett really is known for modernizing and centralizing the functions of the state. What were your experiences with Governor Bennett?

LH: I didn't have any trouble with Governor Bennett. The only thing I remember about Governor Bennett was his big words that I couldn't understand.

JW: He did have a problem with that.

LH: But I did get along with Governor Bennett. He happened to be governor when the centennials of a lot of cities happened.

JW: Yes.

LH: When he came to Pratt, he called me and wanted me to meet him at the airport. So, I met him at the airport and escorted him on into Pratt. Governor Bennett and I got along all right.

JW: Governor John Carlin followed Bennett, and he promoted five different constitutional amendments. One of them created a state lottery, another for parimutuel betting, a third one for liquor by the drink, and numerous tax reforms including use value and other tax implementations. I think also the death penalty came up. He had said he would veto it, and then that got him in trouble. Any of those issues, something you know anything about or were involved with?

LH: I remember, but most of those issues I was probably opposed to because liquor by the drink doesn't go along with me very well.

JW: Did you support parimutuel betting and all of the gambling stuff?

LH: No.

JW: What about the death penalty? Were you ever involved in debates on that issue?

LH: I was deeply involved in the death penalty. I had the religious part of that debate. I used Romans 13 chapter and the 3rd verse which says the ruler has the right to punish evildoers. I don't remember even how the death penalty came out.

JW: It won, or it was defeated, and sometimes it was put back in place. David, help me out. John Carlin, I think what I said was, John Carlin had said he would veto the death penalty. So, because of that, Republicans put the death penalty on the floor in the House many times, and we had numerous debates about the death penalty. Ultimately under Joan Finney, it passed.

DH: Yes, Mike Hayden had run to enact it and could not get it enacted with a Republican legislature. And then with Joan Finney, she wouldn't veto it. She let it become law without her signature.

JW: Let's go on and talk about Mike Hayden and his highway plan and economic growth. Remember, I'm saying that governors have been big change agents. We've talked about Bennett. We've talked about Carlin and Governor Mike Hayden.

JW: And, of course, Governor Mike Hayden promoted his highway plan strongly. He only served one term, but throughout that term, he was very interested in economic growth and highways. Do you have any recollections of working on some of his policies?

LH: No, I don't have any recollections of working with Mike Hayden.

JW: What about Governor Finney? I think you may have gotten to be good friends with her because we found a picture of you on her houseboat, you and Darlene, some kind of a legislative retreat on the lake.

LH: It was just a social thing.

JW: Her legacy was that she changed completely the way that public schools were funded; [first] there was the House bill that she vetoed in '91, and then in '92, the new school finance formula passed. Some people say that the House Democrats were the main drivers on the school finance issue, but the death penalty was also an issue as well as initiative and referendum, which she promoted but did not pass.

LH: As I remember, all the debates on school finance and all the different bills, Pratt was big enough that it didn't make a whole lot of difference what was brought up. It wasn't affected all that much. But my rural schools were all affected severely on some of the bills, and so that's what I had to be careful of. But it was nice to have Pratt where it was in the position because they were still happy.

JW: Legislators need happy constituents, don't they? Were you friendly with Governor Finney?

LH: Oh, yes. Of course, I was trying to get appointed to the Grain Inspection Department, and she was balking to do it. But we had some good Democrats that helped change her mind. So, we made it in there,

JW: You left the legislature in 1992, and you took a job with the State of Kansas as grain inspector. Tell me what the grain inspector does.

LH: He manages the grain inspection that occurs out over about eight stations across the state that takes the grain and grades it, whether it's good or bad. But the reason I changed was the farm was not doing good at the time. I decided that I needed the income. That was the reason I changed and went to the Grain Inspection Department at that time, and I served there for four years until Graves was elected, and he fired me right off after he was elected. But the Grain Inspection Department had been wanting to privatize. After I left, I think they privatized and went under the Feed and Grain Inspection Association in Topeka.

JW: As you think back on the years that you spent in the legislature, the years that you spent on the school board, both school boards, you've seen a tremendous amount of change over that period of time from the sixties when you were in the school board, the seventies, eighties, and nineties, when you were in the legislature, and up until today. What do you see about the policies that are in effect today that you think are better or worse than where we were? What kind of change have you seen over that period of time?

LH: Well, you're covering a lot of time there.

JW: I really am trying to get you to think about—you've reached, I guess, senior status at this point. You've lived a long time, and you've been involved, and you still pay attention to what's going on. Are we in better shape in Kansas than we were?

LH: Well, if you look at Kansas down over the years, at one time there was a farmhouse on every section practically, sometimes on each quarter. It has dwindled down now to where you can hardly find a farm family out in the rural areas in Pratt County now. So you can tell what has happened to the farmer. It has changed everything that has happened, and there are other things that have happened that I think have more effect on where we are today than where we had been.

JW: Well, the federal government has changed its relationship to states and local governments. That's one big change in how things are funded. I guess I was kind of fishing around to see if you had maybe some advice for people who are in charge today for directions that we need to go. Would you tell them that we need more support for farmers? Is that what it's going to take to make sure we have a food supply in the future?

LH: I think the government's going to have to get involved in helping the farmers. I don't know how else they can get the prices they need to support all the high cost of machinery and inputs, fertilizer and seed, all of those inputs.

JW: The cost of machinery is exorbitant these days.

LH: The biggest things these days is the size of the farms. Now every farmer's farm is 1,000, 2,000 acres, and what worries me is what's going to happen in the future. It's impossible for a young man to get started in farming any more. They either have to inherit it or somebody give it to them. I don't know how that's going to work if the government gets involved. We've had Chinese come in and buy land. I'm not sure what all is going on there, but I know that's not where we want to go for sure.

But during the fifties and sixties, we were still attending church. We had church on Sunday morning, church Sunday night, church Wednesday night, and even the schools didn't have programs on Wednesday nights because the church was meeting. That has all fallen by the wayside. Now, no church except on Sunday morning for most churches. There are still some that do have on Sunday night and Wednesday night, but we have pushed back God, and I think God has set the moral standards. I had an uncle say that. We have turned our backs on God when you have same-sex marriage that God has condemned several times in the New Testament. I don't know why the Supreme Court without a constitutional amendment changed that, except that the Republicans were probably using that against us.

JW: What kind of hopes and dreams do you have for your grandkids? You've got grandkids now, right?

LH: Well, I worry about my grandkids, my great-grandkids. I don't know how they're going to remain faithful to God. I am very faithful to God and Christ. I was baptized in the church at fourteen, and I still believe that salvation comes through Him, and it's the only way. We have forgotten the love that God has shown to us. He has told us to love our neighbors as ourselves. What are we doing today? We act like we're hating our neighbors. He's told us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us, and we've forgotten all about that. You don't hear anything about it anymore. I think that is what is really hurting this nation today. If we could set our moral standards on what God had said, there wouldn't be any same-sex marriage, and that's the dumbest thing that I've ever heard done is same-sex marriage. It's ridiculous.

JW: Well, I appreciate your taking time to meet with us and to talk about some of the things that you've done. I remember meeting you for the first time in the House of Representatives. You'd been there already ten years. You were on the Ways and Means Committee, and you were well respected by everybody because you had important positions, and you cared about what was going on in the state of Kansas, and you seemed to care about people. I remember respecting you and appreciating the service that you gave.

LH: When I was in the legislature, I chaired two years of legislative prayer breakfasts.

JW: I saw that in the book that your wife made for you.

LH: When Governor Carlin was governor, President Reagan invited him to the prayer breakfast in Washington, DC. Governor Carlin for some reason couldn't go. So, he asked me to go to the prayer breakfast in Washington, DC. So, Darlene and I went up, and we had a good time visiting Washington, DC as well as a good time with the prayer breakfast. I even led the prayer in the House opening when the chaplain didn't show up a time or two.

JW: Good. Well, thank you very much. It's been a pleasure to visit with you. I thank you for what you've done for the state of Kansas.

LH: We thank you, Joan.