Interview with Senator Janis Lee by Joan Wagnon, October 14, 2019
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Joan Wagnon: Welcome. Today's date is October 14, 2019, and it's about 1:30. We're in the Senate Chambers of the Kansas State House in Topeka, Kansas. I'm Joan Wagnon, a former legislator and one of the members of the Kansas Oral History Project. I'll be interviewing Janis Lee, a former Kansas state senator who served from 1989 until 2010.

Janis Lee: 2011, actually.
It was the beginning of 2011, when I went to the Court.

JW: When you changed [jobs]. She represented Senate District 36 from Kensington, Kansas, right in the middle of the state.

JL: North central, yes.

JW: This interview is conducted on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, a not-for-profit corporation, created for the purpose of interviewing former legislators, particularly those who served during the 1960s through 2000. The interviews will be accessible to researchers and educators throughout the Kansas State Historical Society and the State Library, and transcriptions are made possible by a grant from Humanities Kansas. The audio and video equipment is being operated by David Heinemann, also a founding member of the Kansas Oral History Project and a former member of the Kansas House of Representatives for almost as many years as you were. So welcome, Senator Lee.

JL: I'm glad to be here.

JW: Today's interview is one of a series of five that we are doing with women legislators done in cooperation with Washburn University. In the early 1990s, two historians from Washburn came over and interviewed you—do you remember that?

JL: I had forgotten it until I recently saw the interview again.

JW: I think you were interviewed by Sara Tucker.

JL: Yes.

JW: I'll give you a copy of Sara's report. You were brand new.

JL: Yes.

JW: And it was a fascinating read because it talks about how you campaigned, why you decided to run, what motivated you, your family, and all kinds of things. So rather than taking time today to cover all that, we will simply incorporate this in the record, and it will be posted with your interview.

How do I summarize Senator Janis Lee? You were married young.

JL: Yes.

JW: A farm wife with three kids. You finally got through college in about 1970. You were handling the farm and the kids.

JL: Actually we weren't on the farm when I went to college, but we had three children while I went to college. So it took me seven years to get through, but I did.

JW: Persistence is what I read in that interview. You first ran for office in 1984 for the House.

JL: Yes.

JW: You laid your plans very carefully. When Neil Arasmith stepped down—

JL: No, he did not step down. I beat him.

JW: Beat him well.

JL: Yes. I made the decision. I had decided earlier that I wanted to be in the legislature. I understood how it affected especially our local schools and many other things and felt that it was an opportunity that if I worked hard, I would have a chance. I worked very, very hard, and I was able to beat him. As you say, I got 67 percent of the vote, which was sort of astounding for a district that was a very strong Republican district.

JW: You have been a Democrat forever.

JL: Yes, always.

JW: Your families were all Democrats.

JL: Yes.

JW: So it never occurred to you to not be a Democrat.

JL: No, I was a Democrat. To be anything else would have been untrue. It would have simply not fit for what I was.

JW: Is there anything about your background that wouldn't be covered in that interview that you'd want to tell me now?

JL: I really can't think of anything. As I talked in that interview, my family always was interested in politics. My dad had run unsuccessfully for the Senate. To me, it was something that I should

do. You were supposed to provide service to your community. This was one of my ways to do it. I can't remember if I said in the interview or not, actually my first elected office was to be Township Treasurer.

JW: No, that's not in there. So tell me.

JL: I did not run. I got a call after the election by the County Clerk. The current Township Treasurer had decided to retire. Those three men who were on the Township Board at the time and their wives all wrote in my name, and I found out afterwards that I had been elected with six votes.

JW: I think that's pretty interesting. What we're going to do today, Janis, is talk about the twenty-two years that you spent in the legislature, your perceptions on what has happened with respect to policy, politics, and governance. I know you've been involved in all three. I hope you will reflect on tangible policies that were adopted, things that didn't get done, and the way that you as a female leader shaped your perceptions of government broadly. I'm also interested in talking to you at the end about what you did when you left the legislature and went to the Court of Tax Appeals and since then.

So let's start with the district. What was the district like when you first ran?

JL: There were eight counties, five counties along the Nebraska border from Norton to Republic, and then three counties south of that—Rooks and Osborne and Mitchell County, so a very rural district. There were not any large towns. The largest town was maybe 3,000 people, so a very rural district.

JW: How did it change over time?

JL: The counties only got smaller. The district changed because I went through reapportionment twice.

JL: in the end, I had ten counties, and the only reason that it was only ten counties by the end of 2002, the last reapportionment, was because Ellis County came into the district. While the other counties had 3,000 to 5,000 people in it, Ellis County had over 20,000. That way, it was only ten counties. It changed dramatically when Ellis County came in.

JW: Did you think that reapportionment was fair to your constituents? I know you had a big fight in the Senate over those districts, did you not?

JL: We did not the first time. In 1992, I lost Norton County and went down and took in Russell County and Ellsworth County. That was fairly similar to what I had had before. It was fairly homogeneous. It brought in a little bit more of oil country that I had not had before. But outside of that, I didn't feel that that was unfair.

The 2002 reapportionment was the most difficult one. There was a large push during that to actually put me in a district with another senator, and I ended up in a district with another senator, but it was a district that I had some say in terms of how it was arranged and made the decision that I wanted Ellis County in my district at that time.

It's difficult when you're reapportioning rural Kansas. Many of the counties have a lot of similarities. Perhaps Ellis would be the one, as probably the Garden City area or the Colby area, those are a little bit different than the surrounding small counties. I never felt in terms of the constituents that it was that unfair. The unfairness for them is that their senator, whomever it is, is a long ways away. You can't live in all ten counties or all fifteen counties.

JW: Did you ultimately move out of Kensington?

JL: No, we did not move until after I left the Senate. We chose Hays, quite frankly, to retire because we had a lot of friends in Hays, friendships that we had developed during the time that I represented Ellis County, but also for the fact that it was closer to really good medical services and some things like that.

JW: Did the issues change by adding density in a place like Hays?

JL: Probably one of the main issues was the university. I had had a technical college in my district, always because Mitchell County had had the technical college, and North Central Technical College was also in Ellis County, but the university became a part of the district. There were a little bit of changes in the interest, but not a great deal other than Hays is just a bigger community as opposed to the really small communities.

JW: How did you change over these twenty-two years personally?

JL: Oh, goodness. I believe that I became a better listener. That's one of the things that you have to do as a legislator because one of the things it seemed to me—I did every election year, I started door to door in May and did door to door from May until Election Day. I usually started at 9:00 in the morning and went until dark at least five days a week. One of the things that I learned doing that was that people liked to be heard. You didn't always have to be able to provide for them what they asked for, but they wanted to be heard. They wanted to know somebody was listening. I gained a tremendous amount of experience and knowledge just because that's what you do as a legislator. You learn so that you understand the things that are brought to you.

I remember at one point I had a woman who was just monitoring what I was doing. It was actually a woman who worked at Johnson County Community College. She had taken a semester off. One of the things she did was to come and spend some time with me. She was so amazed at the number of issues, as you know, that you as a legislator deal with in a day. You have one phone call about this issue, and two minutes later, there's a phone call about something that's totally different. They all expect you to have some understanding.

JW: I never felt the need to do any polling in a legislative race because I felt like knocking on doors was the best polling that you get because people talk to you. Did you feel the same?

JL: Yes, although we did do polling in 2002, when the district changed so dramatically, and I ended up in a district with another senator. We did do some fairly in-depth polling. What it brought to us was what I felt that I already knew from talking with people.

JW: Did you run against each other?

JL: Yes.

JW: Who was your opponent then?

JL: Larry Salmans. I actually beat two incumbent senators in my twenty-two years.

JW: That's pretty good, Janis. The other thing, if I think about that span of time from 1988, when you had the first election, to 2010, when you retired, is that Kansas changed a lot.

JL: Yes, it did.

JW: What we're learning in all of these interviews that we're doing is how much changed and what the impact of that was. As a rural legislator, I would be very interested in hearing you talk about the changes in people's attitudes, in their politics. How did things change in Kansas?

JL: A couple of things that I saw change that were fairly interesting to me, first of all, was liquor by the drink. When I was first elected, that just was—people did it, but you just didn't admit that you did it. If you voted for it, especially if you were from rural Kansas, it was going to be pretty difficult for you. I saw that change dramatically over the years. That was a slower change than some of the other change.

The other issue would be marriage, and who can be married. I saw a dramatic change in that from 2002 until 2010. Gay marriage was just a very negative—same-sex marriage was a very negative thing in 2002. By 2010, it became much more acceptable. It just isn't an issue now for most people.

JW: Talk a little bit about the rural attitudes. Maybe this is a little bit of stereotyping, but I always thought that the rural legislators that I worked with were very pragmatic, very down to earth, very common sense. Is that still a true thing?

JL: With some, and not with some. But, yes, I think that was part of what your rural upbringing was, to be very thoughtful about things and not make huge changes but have to have good reasons for why you did make changes. One of the major changes that I saw that I find very disappointing is when I was first elected, yes, you were elected as a Democrat or as a

Republican. I obviously would not have been elected if it wasn't for the Republicans who voted for me. My district was 67 percent Republican, 21 percent Democrat. I couldn't get elected with all the Independents and all the Democrats. I had to have a lot of crossover. People were willing to listen and to talk. They weren't in such trenches. The longer I was here, the more I saw that at least the elected officials were not as willing to cross over and to work with somebody on the other side to get good policy.

I found that, in the beginning, once you were here, I would work with a lot of rural legislators, Republican or Democrat. Most of them were Republican, but that made no difference because we felt the same about issues. We felt that our constituents felt the same. As time went on, that became more difficult, and I find that sad.

JW: I hear that kind of a comment from many people as we've done these interviews. Just a couple more questions about change over time. Was campaigning very different in, say, ten years after you ran? In your interview here, you talk about coffees. I remember, Janis, you would drive home all the time. In fact, you rolled your car once.

JL: Yes.

JW: Driving home too late at night. You drove and talked and drank coffee.

JL: That never changed. Throughout all of the twenty-two years, during session, I would have two coffees almost every Saturday. Maybe twice during the year, I would stay in Topeka on the weekend to try to get caught up. Otherwise, I would have two coffees every Saturday around my district so that I was in every county at least twice if not three times during a session to be available to talk.

Then all summer—I drove 45,000 miles a year for every year I was in the legislature. You had a big district and to be available so that people felt comfortable with you. The one poll that I talked about that one of the things they asked in the six counties that had been my district for ten years, they asked how many people had had contact with me. The people did the polling were shocked because 36 percent of the people had had actual contact with me. About 95 percent of those people were satisfied with the contact they had had with me. They felt that that was a large percentage for a rural district.

JW: That's huge.

JL: It was because I felt that was necessary. In order to represent people, not only did I need to hear from them, but they needed to be comfortable with me so that when they had an issue, they would feel like they could come to me, and we could talk about it.

JW: One of the things that we heard in another interview was that in the rural communities, there was an acceptance for Democrats because there was a reservoir of good will towards

Roosevelt and some of those kind of policies. Did you notice if the electorate got more partisan as you stayed in office?

JL: Yes. It did, although I still felt acceptance. They got more partisan, yes, although the last election, I won by 60 percent. So it hadn't changed a whole lot. But that was, I think, because I brought in three new counties south of Ellis County, and I found it much more difficult to make connections in that area than I had ever found in the area north. It may have been because I had been in the area up north so much longer, and people were comfortable with me, and moving to a new area, it was more difficult to make the connections.

JW: While you were in the Senate, you served on a lot of different committees. I had a two-and-a-half page list of all your committee assignments. You were on Agriculture, Assessment and Taxation, Elections, Energy, Legislative Educational Planning, Local Government. In 1993, you became the ranking Democrat on Energy and Natural Resources. By '97, you were the ranking Democrat on the Assessment and Tax Committee and added Education. By 2001, you had risen to the position of assistant minority leader, which is a post you held until 2010. Throughout that whole time, what was constant in terms of your workload was Assessment and Taxation.

JW: So Tax just had to have been a common thread. One of the things I remember from your earlier interview was your talking about why you thought Tax was important and why you tried to get on that committee. Do you want to comment on that?

JL: I can't exactly remember what I said, but Tax affects so much of what we do. It affects how we fund government, but it also affects all of the people. To me, fair and equitable taxing is such an important thing for us to work toward. Nobody likes taxes, but they like the services that government provides. I just think it's very basic to government is how we tax people and how we use those dollars.

I love the intricacies of taxation and figuring out exactly how they work and what's good tax policy and what's not.

JW: Maybe that's why Governor Kelly has asked you to be the co-chair of her Tax Reform Commission?

JL: It could be. She knew my experience. Then, as you know, after that, I went to the Court of Tax Appeals. What's probably not in the record is that under Governor Finney, I became chair of the Use Value Advisory Committee. That's when you were secretary [of Revenue] there later on. I worked on the Use Value Advisory Committee for about ten years under both Republican and Democrat governors, dealing with the Department of Revenue, and looking at use value and agriculture.

JW: Of course, that is a huge dollars and cents issue to people who are in the agriculture community.

JL: Yes, it is. It's very important to the agriculture community.

JW: Have your views on the importance of committees changed any? You were waxing eloquently in your earlier interview about how important committee work was.

JL: I think committee work is very important. As an individual legislator, that's one of the most important things you do because you helped to form policy. I found that having information and having accurate information could make you very effective in committee work. I do remember one time that I stated something that I thought was a fact in a committee meeting, and afterwards, I found out that I was incorrect. The first thing that I did at the next meeting of that same committee was to tell people that "What I told you last time, I was not correct" because to me, your veracity was such an important part of being an effective legislator.

I found at least in the first number of years that party was not that important in committee work, but your ability to be a part of a group and to work together was what was very important in how effective you were.

JW: Like you, I spent a lot of time on Tax Committees on the House side.

JL: I know that.

JW: I never thought that was very partisan work either.

JL: No.

JW: It was a giant puzzle, for one thing, and a lot of times, connected to just solving that problem and not so much partisan until you got down to raising taxes, and then we had to push and shove.

JL: Then it became more partisan. I found the same thing in natural resources. It was, "How do you find what is the best policy?" That's what I loved about the legislature, I loved about committee work, was learning to understand what's good policy for our state.

JW: I want to talk about the policy issues during your time. We've got a lot of ground to cover. You worked with four governors, Mike Hayden, Joan Finney, Bill Graves, and Kathleen Sebelius.

JL: Yes, and Mark Parkinson.

JW: Oh, I forgot Mark, yes, who took over [from Sebelius].

JL: When Kathleen went to the federal level, yes.

JW: Two Republicans and three Democrats. Some of the sessions stood out because of the productivity. That era from 1989 when you first came in through 1994, when I go through the

clips and read what the press is saying about all of that, there's just a whole raft of issues—comprehensive highway plan, a water plan, school finance, a classification of property, tax reform, mental health reform, prisons and sentencing reform, children's initiatives and the death penalty. Janis, You were there in the middle of all of those. Which ones of those issues were you involved in? I'd like for you just to talk a little bit about your involvement with those issues in that time period.

JL: Of course, you were very much involved in the school finance.

JW: I was.

JL: That was one that I was very interested in from sort of an outside perspective because, to me, that was so important for my rural schools. What you all did with that formula was so dramatic and so helpful to our rural schools in terms of the equalization aid and moving away from local property tax to state income and sales tax. That to me was a significant thing that I worked sort of on the perimeters.

Water issues, I did a lot with water issues. One that I remember that I had a lot of input is actually now affecting Hays, and that is the Water Transfer Act. I was part of that.

JW: Talk about that.

JL: We put in place a structure that you have to go through in terms of your moving a certain amount of water more than thirty-five miles. You have to provide to the Department of Water Resources the reason why it's better to bring it where you are bringing that water as opposed to where it currently is. One of the parts of that is proving that is the most difficult is "Why is it more important for us to be brought"—the other thing is that when you take it from agriculture use to municipal use, you lose a lot of the water rights. You lose about 40 percent of the water right, but that was one that I really enjoyed working.

Another one that we worked on in Natural Resources was brought to us by the federal government, but it deal with landfills, and how we had to adopt federal regulations and make them work in our rural communities in terms—it was very good legislation, but it was very difficult.

JW: The Water Plan that passed in '89 was pretty dramatic.

JL: Yes.

JW: Do you have any memory of that very fast ride with Gus Bogina coming from the hospital? [On a call of the Senate, the Highway Patrol transported Senator Gus Bogina so he could cast the deciding vote on the water plan.]

JL: I do, yes. I'm one of those that actually supported the plan, but I didn't support how it was being funded. So I was one of the no votes.

JL: Yes. In fact, I had twenty-one no votes until one of the senators who had promised his vote to us changed his vote. That's when Senator Bogina was brought in by ambulance and brought in a hospital bed. Literally he was on a hospital bed.

JW: Casting his vote.

JL: In a hospital gown, casting his vote. Yes, it was pretty dramatic. But the Water Plan has been a wonderful thing. It was something that was very much needed for Kansas.

JW: I remember a lot of angst within the rural communities when we started trying to resolve the school finance issue. It was a juggling act between doing what the courts said we had to do. It had to be equal for kids and changing things pretty dramatically. Did you get caught up in any of that?

JL: I found that my constituents were very willing to listen. Of course, maybe that's because I had so many public meetings and talked about it. And talked about it in-depth. Yes, they were concerned about their schools, but they were relieved when the mill levys went down dramatically as they did go down. Not all understood that that came about because of the school finance, but some did. Yes, there was a lot of angst. Schools are such an important part of any community, but especially of a small rural community.

One of the most interesting things I did as a senator, I had a young woman who grew up in Smith Center, Kansas, lived in Kansas City, Kansas, Johnson County. She invited me to come and arranged for me to spend a day in Johnson County and visit with their schools, Shawnee Mission and Blue Valley. It was fascinating to me. One of the things I learned was how important the community schools were in an urban area, just as they are important in a small town. And the fact that if you have a community school in Johnson County, if that school closes, it affects the value of all the homes in the surrounding area, just like it does in rural Kansas, just with a different perspective. So many things were alike.

JW: If you were working on use value and property tax issues, the Classification Amendment passed during that same timeframe.

JL: Classification passed just before I came into office.

JW: My recollection is that there was a myriad of legislation to implement it.

JL: Yes.

JW: We had to figure out what that meant.

JL: Yes.

JW: We spent several years passing definitional things and procedural things, which you got to deal with later when you got to the Court of Tax Appeals.

JL: Yes.

JW: Do you have any comments on that?

JL: Well, it wasn't directly, but, yes, all that we did as I was in the legislature, especially serving on the Tax Committee, was very helpful to me as the chief hearing officer and judge pro tem with the Court of Tax Appeals because I understood the background of why different things were a certain way. Yes, classification certainly came up, but, of course, people don't come to the Court of Tax Appeals if they're happy with their taxes. Lots of times, they didn't understand why it was this way or that way. It was just that they were paying too much money.

JW: What kind of interest groups were driving those issues?

JL: The Farm Bureau, the Kansas Livestock Association were two that were very influential in my rural area. There was a farmers' union, but it was not nearly as—it did not have nearly as large of a backing as either the Farm Bureau or the Kansas Livestock Association.

JW: Had you been politically active within the Farm Bureau?

JL: No. I had not. They actually opposed me in my first election. But after my first election, the Farm Bureau then supported me.

JL: I was one of the few Democrats that the Farm Bureau supported. In fact, one year later on, I got a state award from the Farm Bureau for some of the work I had done.

JW: Was it the Livestock Association then that you were active in, KLA?

JL: Yes, we were members of KLA. I wasn't real active in it. My brother was very active. My brother was KLA president at one point.

JW: You had a lot of farming interests that were going on at that same time.

JL: Absolutely, yes. Another thing that I remember, and this is sort of a side story, but at one point, when I was on the Ag Committee, and this was early on, the dairy people had wanted the state to put in place a dairy subsidy, to put a tax on milk as a state subsidy for dairy farmers. We had no state subsidies for any agriculture, and I didn't think we should. I ended up being the deciding vote on the Senate Ag Committee to kill that bill.

JL: Mike Beam, who is now the secretary of the Livestock Association, did not support that bill. I remember Mike meeting me at the door of the Senate when we left the Senate that day. He said, “I don't really have anything to talk to you about,” but he said, “I'm just going to walk, and we're going to pretend so you don't get inundated and beat up.” The dairy producers were here that day.

JW: You were working with Mike Hayden and Joan Finney during that time.

JL: Yes.

JW: She left in '94, when Graves came in.

JL: Yes.

JW: Did you have any interactions with the Governor's Office, any recollections about how they were helpful on these issues?

JL: I was one of the leaders that met with Governor Finney when she was governor. We would meet on Monday morning and go over with the governor what she wanted to have done. I didn't have as much with Governor Graves, but I did with Governor Finney and talked with her, especially with her daughter Mary. Her daughter Mary was very, very helpful on a number of issues—first of all, getting the governor to be supportive, and then working with us to get things passed.

JW: Sure. By 1995, brought about I guess by the 1994 election, the politics and the issues in Kansas shifted substantially in part due to the election of a new group of social conservatives, particularly in the House.

JL: Yes.

JW: I don't think it hit you [in the Senate] until a couple of years later.

JL: It didn't.

JW: Tim Shallenburger was speaker of the House. Bud Burke was president of the Senate. The press reported many issues were debated, but few were passed. Abortion, extension of the lottery, and tax relief, particularly for car taxes, became central, unresolved issues. Governor Graves created a tax reform task force to sort out the tax issues created by the previous time, and by the end of the '96 session, crime bills and juvenile justice were passing as well as they finally got the extension passed for the 35 mills. You read the '95 clips, and they didn't do anything that session. They were just deadlocked.

JL: Yes.

JW: You're sitting over here in the Senate.

JL: There wasn't that kind of deadlock in the Senate yet.

JW: So that was all happening in the House.

JL: Yes.

JW:. But what comments would you have on this realignment of the legislature along social conservative lines?

JL: I believe that it to a great extent has continued through to today. It's much more socially conservative than it was in the beginning, except for perhaps the liquor by the drink. That did not continue to be as conservative as it was in the beginning. But, yes, it had an effect on almost everything you did.

JW: Did it track with constituent attitudes? Were those social conservatives reflecting what was going on in your district? Or were they reflecting their own concerns about issues?

JL: I believe they were more reflecting their own concerns. I did not see that dramatic of a change in my district. There were some things that there was a slight change, but I did not see as much from my ordinary citizens.

JW: Of course, there was a big change nationally. That was [U.S. Representative Newt] Gingrich's Contract for America. There was a lot of change at the federal level. I'm always interested in how Kansas reacted to what was happening nationally and [whether] what was happening was actually some fairly clever legislative strategy to get a lot of different kind of people elected.

JL: I think that's what happened. You saw that certain groups that were socially more conservative worked much harder to get their people in line. A lot of that was done through churches, which was one of the things that I found interesting.

JW: In that '95 to '2000 time period, what were the big issues that you were working on here? Now you're the ranking Democrat [on the tax committee].

JL: I would have to go back and look. I'm not good any more at remembering what year we did what.

JW: Did you work on the car tax issue?

JL: Oh, yes. I remember that.

JW: I think you were in the middle of that one.

JL: I worked very hard to— Yes, to figure out ways to make it—if you're going to lower the taxes on cars, that you lower the taxes on the older cars much more than you lower the taxes on the new Cadillacs. The chairman of the House, as I recall, was a Cadillac dealer who then moved to the Senate. His interest was in lowering the taxes on—

JW: Senator [Les] Donovan.

JL: On the fancy new cars, and we were more interested in, first of all, finding a way to make it work appropriately, but to be certain that it was equitable between the new and the old, the expensive and the less expensive vehicles. I do remember that issue, yes.

JW: In 1998, Senator Dick Bond, who had then become president of the Senate, said abortion politics tied the legislature in knots.

JL: It did.

JW: But the legislature also passed a record tax cut of 247 million by dropping the state mill levy for schools down to twenty mills. Talk about those things, can you?

JL: Yes. Abortion became a very, it always had been, but it did tie up many other issues. Any time you tried to deal with a health care bill, usually people tried to make abortion to be part of any health care issue.

JW: And you were always a Pro Life legislator.

JL: I was a sort of Pro Life. I was not as strong an advocate as some, but, yes. It was just inappropriate in terms of how that issue was put into the middle of everything else.

Then, in terms of the twenty mills, that was popular, but it also made funding schools more difficult, finding the money to replace that and not having the local option budget have to become so large, which, of course, was very detrimental to the rural areas. Lowering at one point during that time the amount of state support to the local option budget was also lowered. It was not kept at the level that it was supposed to, which made it—

JW: When it was at thirty-five mills, thirty-five mills was an average of what the tax load would have been statewide.

JL: Yes.

JW: When you drop it to twenty, you're having to put [in] a lot more sales [tax], a lot more income tax. Was that when we started underfunding schools and got in trouble with the courts?

JL: Yes, I think it was. The other thing we did though was we allowed the local option budget to increase, too, at that time, which helped a little bit, but it also made it disequal for rural schools or for poor schools. It wouldn't just be rural [schools]. It would be poor schools. Wyandotte County was one as well, yes.

JW: The urban schools in some of the rural areas.

JL: Yes.

JW: And equalization was the issue?

JL: That's when I believe we began to have more trouble with the courts in terms of not funding appropriately.

JW: Now Bill Graves is governor. He comes in in '94, and he's got to deal with all these other issues and these social conservatives.

JL: And he was not [a social conservative].

JW: No. But by '99, the leaders again are calling the session historic because they funded a second ten-year Transportation Plan.

JL: Yes.

JW: A two-year funding of schools, including an increase in base state aid and restructuring the governance of higher education. I think those are big issues. Do you agree?

JL: Yes. I helped with the restructuring of higher ed. That's something that I always worked very strongly on because I had a technical college in my district. At those times, they were—before that time, they were called technical schools. People did not want to send their kids to school, when they graduated from high school. They wanted to send them to college.

Dennis McKinney was another one that we worked very hard on this together and got it so that technical colleges could become colleges if they also taught enough of the basic education courses that they could provide a certificate like a two-year community college could provide.

We also then restructured—I think it was in '99, but it was in that timeframe—we restructured the Board of Regents so that they had to have more coverage over technical colleges. They had not been that interested in technical colleges before. Reggie Robinson was not necessarily in favor of that, but we worked around Reggie, and we got it passed so that the Board of Regents had more influence over technical colleges.

JW: Who were the leaders on that?

JL: Well, Dennis and I were two of the leaders on that.

JW: [Senator] Sheila Frahm was in the middle of that, wasn't she?

JL: She was to some extent. Sheila wanted to make certain that the community colleges could keep their structure in terms of their governance she wanted to have so that they could also teach the technical courses and get the support the state gave to the technical courses because the state at that time was funding 85 percent of technical education. That money could also be sent to community colleges. She worked on that as well.

JW: And Senator Emert?

JL: Yes, Tim Emert.

JW: We've interviewed him and [Senator] Christine Downey. Both of them were involved.

JL: Yes.

JW: That's a period where it looked like, '89-'94 was a very productive period, and then '94-'99 was kind of a strange time with a change going on, changes in composition of the legislature and attitudes. But by the time you get to '98, '99, 2000, they're taking on big issues again.

JL: Yes.

JW: Am I understanding that correctly?

JL: Yes, I believe you're understanding that correctly. I would certainly agree with that.

JW: But by 2000, then all of a sudden, budget issues are hitting.

JL: Yes.

JW: And Kansas started running out of money. So every time you give tax dollars away—

JL: There was a recession at the federal level. It wasn't as big as the one later on, but there was a recession to some extent at the federal level, and that made it more difficult. When there's a downturn at the federal level, that makes it—you don't have enough money.

JW: In 2001, you became the assistant minority leader. How many Democrats did you have at that point? When you came in—

JL: There were eighteen Democrats.

JW: And when you became the assistant minority leader—

JL: It was either eleven or thirteen.

JW: So a sizable reduction.

JL: Yes, a big reduction, and [Senator] Anthony Hensley became the minority leader, and I became the assistant minority leader.

JW: How did your leadership role change your legislative activities or did it?

JL: It didn't really change. I had more responsibility. I ended up on more interim committees.

JW: I'm glad you like committees, Janis.

JL: I stayed on the same number of committees, and it didn't really change what I did in the legislature. I was there to support our caucus and to support Anthony.

JW: What was your role? You support Anthony. You support the caucus. Did you have something specific that you did as the assistant minority leader?

JL: Tried to understand what the different members of the caucus wanted, what was important to them, and how do you make those things work together?

JW: Just keeping folks in line?

JL: Yes, and trying to keep the caucus moving together in the same general direction, although we never required people to vote any certain way. We would encourage them, tell them why this was a good thing, but also understand that if your particular district, it's not, then that's what you have to do.

JW: Did you personally experience or witness a party leadership election that was influenced by gender? Did being a woman cause you to win or not win?

JL: I never found that. Even when I was running for office, I had as many people say to me, "We're going to vote for a woman because men have screwed it up" as said, "I don't think a woman should be in there." I never found gender to be a huge issue. I found it probably being a Democrat in terms of getting elected was more of an issue.

But I think in terms of my constituency, women for a long time have been important in farming operations. Many times, it's the women who do the bookwork. Many times the women are out there on the tractors or the trucks or whatever.

JW: And that's what you did. You did the bookwork. You cooked for them.

JL: Yes. I never found that. I found in the legislative process—and maybe I'm just naive—but I found that having good information, being well informed, was what helped you in terms of what kind of influence you had.

JW: I don't know that I disagree with that. I think that was an important ingredient in terms of being effective.

JL: Yes.

JW: Choosing leaders, sometimes I think people are more cognizant now that we want to be sure we have a balance in leadership teams, some women, some men, some rural, some urban. Did you experience any of that?

JL: Probably rural/urban than men/women.

JW: These are the questions that we're asking just to try to track these attitudes about women serving in public positions. So this is a long one. Just bear with me. Personal identity is loosely defined as gender, age, race, class, sexual orientation, marital status, whatever. Did you ever experience times in the legislature where you believed that your personal identity influenced your ability to pass policy, work with fellow legislators, or provide constituent services?

JL: It's a huge question.

JW: Yeah, I know.

JL: Yes. I think my personal identity in terms of my background helped me to get legislation passed. I believe that my personal background, my farming background, my rural background, the fact that I'd been on my local school board, the fact that I'd been very active in 4-H, the fact that I'd actually served on three or four different statewide commissions before I was elected, all of those things helped me work with my constituents and helped me with my constituents, yes.

JW: And they probably helped you with your colleagues in the legislature, didn't they?

JL: Yes, they did.

JW: “Janis can do that because she knows how to do something.”

JL: “She knows something about that,” yes.

JW: 2003 to 2010 brought new governors, Sebelius-Parkinson with a new agenda. Democrats are outnumber 3:1 in the Senate, 2:1 in the House. Budget issues in 2003 cause the governor to delay payments to governments. We did a tax amnesty, which I remember, whole tax refunds,

and by 2006, the economy had recovered, and she was collaborating with legislators on a 500 million dollar funding plan for public schools.

JL: Yes.

JW: Do you remember those years?

JL: Oh, yes. I remember those years, working with Kathleen, yes.

JW: What do you remember of the policy initiatives from that era? What did you get involved with?

JL: Well, I was involved in a lot of different issues, obviously on Tax Committee, involved in many of the taxing issues. In Education, involved in the education funding. One of the things I do remember, one of the education policy issues that we dealt with, there was a push by the governor and some others in the legislature to increase the local mill levy or to allow—not to increase the mill levy, but to allow the local option budget to be increased. I always opposed that.

I remember being in the governor's office for a meeting and being pressured rather strongly to support allowing the local option budget to be increased, and I finally made my statement that "No, I'm not going to do this. This is what I promised my constituents, and this is what I have to do." At that point, I got out my newspaper and started working on a crossword puzzle.

JW: In the governor's office?

JL: In the governor's office in the meeting because I knew if I didn't, we might get into a discussion that none of us in there really wanted to get into. That was one thing I was not going to give on. It was something that I had promised my constituents, and I couldn't go against what I had promised my constituents.

JW: So twenty-two years later, the legislature has changed dramatically in terms of composition. The partisan balance is different. The rural/urban balance is quite a bit different because populations have shifted. What else are you seeing?

JL: Partisan balance hasn't changed that much. With the changes that have happened in the last couple of years, there's about eleven Democrats now, as there was when I left.

JW: I know, but there were eighteen when you got here.

JL: Yes. The thing that I remember the most about it being eighteen to twenty-two was that everybody's vote was important to your leadership. All it took was two or three people to change, and the whole policy changed. Leadership, both sides, both Democrat and Republican, had to be more cognizant of what every member felt and what was important to every

member. When it gets so lopsided, twenty-nine to eleven or things like that, then if you're on the twenty-nine, you're not important. They only need twenty-one. So that's a huge change that I believe has happened. When it's more even, everybody's vote is more important. Everybody's thought is more important. It's become much more divided.

Again, I remember when I first was here, and you'd get to the end of the session when you'd be on the floor, and then you'd break for an hour and a half because you were voting all day, you'd jump in the car, and it could be as many Republicans as it was Democrat. You'd just go someplace, to a restaurant, and you'd grab a bite. You were with friends. It was a bipartisan group.

I always thought that was so good because you got to know each other. It made it much easier than working when you were in the full Senate or you were in a committee. I don't see that now. I didn't see that in my last few years.

When I was on the Court of Tax Appeals, I was here, of course, in Topeka full time. I would often fix dinner about once every two weeks for Laura [Senator Kelly, now Governor]and some other friends. There was one Republican senator who lived in the same apartment complex that I lived, and we would have her join us. She always was glad to do that, but she didn't have dinner with Laura outside of my place because that was looked down upon by her leadership.

Just learning to be together, to talk about things. You didn't talk about politics. You just talked about other things. I think that's sad when that's been lost.

JW: Did the increased number of women—the numbers have increased substantially. Every ten years, it seems like we had a doubling until we got to about 25, 28 percent women in the legislature. Do you think having more women made a difference?

JL: Yes. Women, I believe, work better together. They are more interested in finding a way to make things work together.

JW: So now we're going into kind of a retrospective. We're winding this up. I didn't mean to keep you quite so long. As you look back on your time in the legislature, what are you the most proud of? That's a lot of years.

JL: I'm most proud of the way that I represented my district, the contact that I kept with my constituents, of the hard work that I put in to be able to do a good job to represent them. Issues, I'm very proud of the water issues I worked on. I'm very proud of the education issues I've worked on, and obviously the tax issues. Sometimes we were very successful, and sometimes we weren't, but the times when you're successful, that really feels good.

JW: Why did you leave?

JL: I left because I had the opportunity to go to the Court of Tax Appeals, and because quite frankly, after twenty-two years, I felt it was time for me to move on. As you know, it's very difficult when you're a legislator, especially like I was, a Democrat from western Kansas, the only one, it would have been very difficult for me to not have run again. That would have just been almost impossible. I'm not certain that I could have won that next election, but more importantly, I just felt it was time for me to move on. Twenty-two years is a long time. I wanted to have time to spend, more with my husband and with my family. For the twenty-two years I was in the legislature, the most time my husband and I had together was usually the Saturdays when he would drive me to some parade. We were in thirty parades a year. Usually in the summertime when I was going to parades, he and I would go together, if he could.

The sad thing about that is I would get in the car and fall asleep, and he'd drive. I didn't realize how tired I was until I left the legislature, and we started doing things together with him driving, and I didn't fall asleep.

JW: That's pretty interesting, Janis.

JL: The other thing that was more interesting for me when I left the legislature and went to the court, I would feel so guilty on a Saturday because I was just home. I wasn't going someplace to meet with constituents. It took me a couple of months to get over feeling guilty because I wasn't serving somebody on Saturday. That's what I did.

JW: For twenty-two years.

JL: For twenty-two years, yes.

JW: The changes in the legislature that you noticed during those years, does the legislature work any better or any less well with other branches of government?

JL: I don't believe it works as well, especially under the Brownback administration. I felt like there were a lot of relationships that were destroyed between the other agencies.

JW: You worked for COTA.[Court of Tax Appeals}

JL: Yes.

JW: Was there any difference in working in a bureaucracy than working in a legislative—

JL: Oh, there's a huge difference. I wish every legislator could work in an agency. What I found was, with the Court of Tax Appeals, those people were very interested in doing their job and doing a good job for the state. It was an 8-5 job, and I got to go home in the evening and got to have weekends to myself, but I loved it, but it was very different, very different from the legislature. It wasn't the politics that there is in the legislature.

JW: So you were a hearing officer?

JL: I was a hearing officer. I also was executive director. They had done away with that position. The court had married the position of chief hearing officer and executive director. Governor Brownback would never allow them to actually give me the name of executive director because he said that was holding two positions at once, but I did the job. The three judges had me do that job. Then I also, whenever one of the judges couldn't be there, I sat on the court.

JW: Who appointed you?

JL: Mark Parkinson appointed me. Governor Parkinson appointed me.

JW: And COTA, the Board of Tax Appeals, changed [names] several times, and it's changed back again.

JL: Yes.

JW: Would you have done this again as a young woman?

JL: Yes, I would. It was a wonderful time. I loved it. I made so many friends across the state and so many friends in my district. Yes, I would do it in a heartbeat again. I'm too old to do it now.

JW: No, I get that.

JL: But if I could do it over again, absolutely I would do it. It was a wonderful time.

JW: I'm sure, after twenty-two years, you have some advice for other women who might be planning to go into politics or serve in the legislature. What would you tell them?

JL: First of all, to get to know your constituents and to spend as much time as you can with your constituents, and then to study the issues very diligently. After twenty-two years, I still found there were issues, things dealing with state government, that I learned, new things that I learned. That was the joy to me, was the opportunity to get to learn.

JW: Janis, you have been a remarkable legislator.

JL: Well, thank you.

JW: And a delightful interview. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you want to add for the record because this is going to be posted on the Kansas Memory at the Kansas State Historical Society, and who knows what else we'll do with it?

JL: Serving in the legislature was a wonderful opportunity. It's a wonderful way for you to be able to serve your community and to help move policy at the state level. Also I would like to

give a huge thanks to the [office of] Legislative Research and the Reviser's Office because they do a wonderful job in the support that they give to us as legislators. You couldn't do it without them.

JL: And thank you very much.

JW: Thank you for your service to the state of Kansas.

JW: And you're continuing it because you're still working with the governor on her tax reform.

JL: Yes.

JW: So I'll be watching to see what you come up with, Janis.

JL: That's a delight, to get to be back for just a little while. It's a delight.

JW: Thank you so much.

JL: Thank you.

JW: This is Joan Wagnon, and this has been an interview with Senator Janis Lee from Kensington, Kansas.

[End of File]