

Interview with:
SHEILA FRAHM

Lt. Governor to Governor Bill Graves and Former US Senator
from Kansas (appointed by Graves)

Interview conducted September 17, 2004

Bob Beatty: Can you tell us a bit about your background?

Shelia Frahm: I began my involvement in public service and politics in Colby, Kansas. Colby is my home, I was born and raised there, as was my husband. We had a farm, raised our children there, and had an opportunity to be involved in the Kansas economy that way. After serving on my local school board I began serving on the state board of education and represented 34 counties for that area. And then I had the opportunity to run for the Kansas Senate. I represented the 40th District. At that time it was 12 counties. Now it's 19 counties, so it has grown.

I had the opportunity to serve with Governor Graves as Lt. Governor. In Kansas, of course, we run as a team and Bill and I agreed – soon to be Governor Graves – and I agreed that that would be the team we'd put together for that election. We had a primary and then the general election.

Bob Beatty: Can you remember the moment you were asked to run with Governor Graves?

Sheila Frahm: Absolutely. It's a delicate process to form a team for a Governor and Lt. Governor. There's personalities involved and I'm sure that each team is different. I do remember that I was serving as Kansas Senate majority leader at that time. Governor Graves was in the Secretary of State's office as the Secretary, and members of my staff and members of his staff had a chat to begin with. So the groundwork was laid in that manner.

I think no one wants to ask and be rejected – either the potential Lt. Governor or the potential Governor. So, shortly after that Bill and I did have a conversation; had the opportunity to discuss the possibilities. We set a timeframe for ourselves to make the decision and then ultimately he and his wife, Linda, and my husband and I met for breakfast. And that was the point which we made the final decision. That whole period took about a week and a half.

Bob Beatty: And did he formally ask you at breakfast?

Shelia Frahm: No. The formal request had been made before. The breakfast was for the formal decision.

Bob Beatty: Why do you think Governor Graves won his first election as Governor?

Sheila Frahm: We had a difficult primary with lots of good candidates. The primary does give you the advantage of being able to get your word out and have the opportunity to explain what you think is important for Kansas. So I think our primary was a key to the election. And then Bill's way of describing what he wanted for Kansas in becoming Governor Graves and what he envisioned for Kansas. I think it just was appealing to the public in Kansas.

Bob Beatty: What was the main message when you campaigned?

Sheila Frahm: My focus primarily was the education issues; the agricultural issues, with my background in agriculture. Then there was health care. Those were areas where certainly we both focused but were often the basis of my remarks.

Bob Beatty: In your view, what did Governor Graves need to do to be a successful Governor, based on your experience in the legislative branch?

Sheila Frahm: When I served as Lt. Governor with Governor Graves, his challenge was to be patient with the legislature. I knew that because I had served in the legislature. Our encouragement to the Governor – when I say “our” I mean the cabinet and those who worked closely with the Governor – was to remember that the legislature moved very, very slowly. You have to have 21 votes in the Senate and 63 votes in the

House. And you're not going to come to a conclusion easily. As a Governor he could make a decision, one person making a decision. So, probably encouraging him to be very patient and to talk to the rank and file as well as the leadership.

Bob Beatty: What traits did Governor Graves exhibit that made him a successful Governor?

Sheila Frahm: Governor Graves was very successful as the Governor of the state of Kansas because he was a very "people person". He cared about what people would say to him. He evaluated very carefully. For example, when it was time to select a judge from the three nominees that were brought forth to him he would interview all three of them personally. He wanted to know the people he was going to appoint and he was going to work with.

I think additionally his low-key, very down-home, "I'm a Kansan and I know what Kansas needs" approach was very soothing and very reassuring to the citizens of Kansas, and even to the colleagues he had to work with across the state. And his success went beyond Kansas, because he worked well with his counterparts in other states – of course he was representing Kansas but just his very nature made it very possible for him to be a very good and strong leader.

Bob Beatty: Did you notice anything that particularly frustrated him about the job?

Sheila Frahm: Appointments are always a challenge. I think that observers would think how exciting it must be for a governor to be able to appoint key individuals to numerous boards, commissions – as well as first of all appointing a new cabinet and leadership for the state. Finding those persons who are willing to work for state government, to commit time to that, probably was one of his greatest frustrations.

Bob Beatty: Did you expect Governor Graves to have so much trouble within his own party?

Sheila Frahm: The challenge that any sitting governor has is to bring forth an agenda that meets the needs of the people of Kansas. And that's not going to be perfectly agreed upon or understood by everyone in his or her own party or even in the opposing party. That's what kind of neat about our politics. But to walk the tightrope of finding the compromise but to stand true to your own faith, your own beliefs, and what you think is important. You have been elected by the people to govern this state. The state of Kansas has decided this is who's going to be governor for four years – possibly eight years, that's our maximum in our state – but the opportunity to balance those needs is there. So it's not surprising that there are differing opinions, even within your own party, let alone from the opposition party.

Bob Beatty: Did the criticism from his own party go too far?

Sheila Frahm: I think the criticism from within your own party is harder to deal with than the criticism from the opposite party. Because you just feel it more in your heart. Now, what that does to your decisions, you may have a headache and a frustration one day, but the next day brings new opportunities.

Bob Beatty: Could you tell us about your appointment to the US Senate and that power of the Governor to do so?

Sheila Frahm: When then-Senator Dole decided he needed to focus his attention 100% on the presidential election, he decided very, very quickly. I think the Governor had about three more hours notice than I or other members of the Governor's cabinet that the Senator was going to resign. So it came as a surprise to all of us. And of course the immediate question is, "Governor, would you like to take that appointment yourself?" And Bill knew immediately, Governor Graves knew immediately that he would stay as Governor, that was his commitment. It was my privilege to visit with him and to make the decision

whether or not that was something I wanted to pursue. It was a courtesy, it was an incredible opportunity, and it was a huge decision.

Bob Beatty: Can you tell us how the process works when a Senate seat becomes open?

Sheila Frahm: When Senator Dole resigned we recognized immediately the responsibility for the governor to appoint a successor to that sitting United States Senator, and there are only 100 United States Senators in our country, two from each state. So Governor Graves knew immediately that he would have to make a decision whether or not he wanted to assume that position. And that's not an impossible scenario that the sitting Governor would want to do that, and I'm sure that's happened in the past – not in Kansas but across the nation. As soon as the Governor knew that he was not intending in any way to assume that responsibility then he asked if I would make a decision as to whether that was something I would like to do.

Bob Beatty: Did he ask you to think about it or was this a formal request?

Sheila Frahm: Somewhere in between. Governor Graves identified that he felt we needed to make the appointment for Kansas in a quick manner – didn't want to leave that kind of decision hanging. So he and I agreed that I would decide in a relatively short time. And I think within a period of three to four days we knew the direction Kansas was going to go for our United States Senate.

Bob Beatty: What would you say Governor Graves' style was as compared to other governors?

Sheila Frahm: Every governor has a unique style, their individual personality comes out. I can identify Governor Graves style by talking about his cabinet. Each secretary was appointed by the governor, sometimes after a nationwide search to find the exact right person. Some of our cabinet were local Kansas citizens who had already worked in government, others were from out of state. The way the governor's cabinet worked was to have a very open discussion. Nobody missed cabinet meetings. Why would you not want to be at the table when the governor was having a meeting? He assigned the Lt Gov – I served as vice-chair of the Cabinet. Other cabinet members played strong roles depending on the issue. We never had a question that we would all work together. We never had a question who we worked for. But not because the governor said, "you will" so much as "we will". And I think that gives you a good sense of what Gov. Graves's style was.

Other cabinets, of course I didn't sit on a cabinet, could only observe. Governor Hayden, coming from western Kansas, I had known him as a legislator, serving in that capacity. His role was very oriented toward specific issues, and he had strong, strong views and strong determination of where Kansas would go and could incite, encourage, his employees – and that's what we are when we work for the Governor - we're the Governor's employees – to accomplish those goals, not by demanding, not by dictating, but by leading.

Bob Beatty: What was Governor Finney's style?

Sheila Frahm: When Gov. Finney was Gov. of Kansas, I served as Majority Leader in the KS Senate. In that capacity, we would often meet as leadership with the Governor and her staff. Gov. Finney left more to staff to determine what was going to happen as far as direction to those out in the field, whether it be the Legislature or public citizens.

Each governor kind of balances carefully their public image and their "I'm at work at the desk" image. You can tell a little bit about each of the governors by looking at the way they configure their desk, where they put their desk in the office and even where they sit at the conference table. Some governors will sit at the head, at the front of the desk, a long desk, and everyone sits beside them or

someone obviously is at the end of the table. Other governors are going to seat themselves in the middle of one side and thus they're closer to those they meet with. I don't recall working with any of our governors who sat behind their official desk when they met with their constituents or even their staff. I think that probably makes a statement too of how they work with other people and how other people feel comfortable working with them.

Whether or not staff controls access to the office is another distinction probably between governors. And if staff keeps the public from getting to the governor they're less available and not viewed as communicative. Governor Graves had opportunity to make sure that everyone – and I don't mean that people can just walk in, there are security concerns - but he was readily available. So was Governor Hayden. Governor Finney had opportunity to be sure who was coming, but once you met with her, her enthusiasm and personality made you feel very, very welcome.

Bob Beatty: Any thing unique to Kansas that a governor needs to be able to do?

Sheila Frahm: Kansas has a long tradition, a forever tradition of local ownership of land, and we believe very strongly in local control. The decisions certainly shouldn't be made in Washington, D.C., and to some degree people don't even like decisions made in Topeka. They want to make those decisions close to home. I was reminded almost immediately when I got to Washington, D.C. as a new member of the Senate and some of my colleagues were seeking funds and/or intervention and involvement with the federal government in local ownership in their state of land. And I thought to myself, Kansas doesn't want any of that money. We don't want any of those programs. That's not our tradition. And that is somewhat unique to Kansas. Now there are other states that don't have very much federal ownership of land, but that's a tradition that is Kansas and certainly I think we would want to be aware of that.

Bob Beatty: How much power does a governor really have, formal vs. informal?

Sheila Frahm: The success of a governor I think, is the informal power. Certainly the formal power is a bill gets passed and you can veto that bill if you're the governor, or in an appropriations bill you can line-item certain things and it takes 2/3 in the House and the Senate, 2/3 vote to overrule that veto, so that's a power. But you do a whole bunch of vetoes and perhaps your credibility is damaged. Far better to have reached a compromise before.

And that is why I say the informal power is probably much more important in the big picture for the governor's success. And that means working with people, reaching the decisions and the conclusions that are best for our state before it becomes written in law and has to be evaluated for a signature or a veto.

Bob Beatty: How does the governor balance doing what they think is right vs. getting re-elected?

Sheila Frahm: I think we're fortunate in KS when we look at the quality and the dedication of the individuals who have served as governor in our state. Some have had to make very difficult decisions, and I'm sure they have lost sleep and they've had to decide whether or not they are going to agree with their party, all parts of their party, whether they are going to honor their own personal viewpoints or whether or not they are going to be able to balance that with the needs of the state. And I can't think of an instance where a governor has made a decision that would have been harmful to the state at the risk of losing an election. It's extremely important to put aside what you think about your next term or even the terms of those who will follow you, because legislators and even local officials can come in on the shirttails of a seated governor.

It's beneficial to his or her party to be the seated governor, but decisions have to be made for the benefit of Kansas, and your own personal beliefs have to be obeyed and understood also. You can't make

decisions based on ...and as I said I don't believe our governors have made decisions based on politics or in a situation that would harm our state.

Bob Beatty: Are there any misconceptions about what the governor does? And is there anything else you want to add about the role of Governor?

Sheila Frahm: The citizens of Kansas – or the citizens of every state – not everybody has the opportunity to know their elected officials personally, so it's easy to feel a distance from your elected leadership. I've always tried to encourage everyone to realize that we are just people. Our governor – he or she – have a family; they are a daughter or son; they have children; they have spouses; they have a church they attend; they have community responsibilities; they are people just like the rest of us. They have a job to do and they've agreed to do it. It's a difficult job because it takes time away from all of those other commitments.

Often our public is disillusioned because a decision isn't made that they believe is the right decision. I think the challenge of government and of those who have opportunity to serve as elected officials is to be as open and as receptive to public input as possible; to hear from the people; to be out of the office. Any governor that sits behind the closed door, any Lt. Governor who sits behind the closed door, any legislator who sits behind the closed door – never is interacting with the public or out in the halls of the capitol or across the state in our cities, will not be successful.

They have to know that we are people and that we care about their input, and understand that every decision is not going to be a decision that satisfies everyone. That's why they are leaders. That's why they were elected governor or our state.

Bob Beatty: Is there a cost to being in the public eye?

Sheila Frahm: Any elected official – and maybe it's hardest at the local level because you run into your constituents at the grocery store – any elected official, local, state, or national, is under constant scrutiny. You're never out of the public eye. You never have a chance to just relax, because you have a responsibility 24 hours a day. Your family has to agree to that responsibility because it affects your children, it affects your spouse. Your parents may wonder, "Why did my child get into this job?"

I remember Governor Graves saying one that his mother had called and said "I'm not sure about this decision son!" And I remember Bill saying, "I said to her 'Mom, I'm the Governor, not you, and I've got to make this decision.'" That's the responsibility that's on the shoulder of the individual that's elected. And yes it's a heavy responsibility.

Bob Beatty: What are your best memories from your years in office as Lt. Governor?

Sheila Frahm: The opportunity to serve as Lt. Governor was an awesome one. The chance to be appointed as United States Senator was something few, few people will ever have in their lifetime. I regret none of the decisions that we made to become involved in those activities. And the very best of any of the offices I've served in and now across the nation that I've had opportunity to meet and to work with, and to find out that some of them are very much like Kansans. And on the other side those who have perspectives or misconceptions about Kansas to be able to help them know what Kansas is – those are my best experiences.