Jim McLean: Hello, I'm Jim McLean, a member of the Kansas Oral History Project Board and a former Statehouse reporter for *The Topeka-Capital Journal*, the KHI News Service, and most recently, the Kansas News Service, a reporting service for public radio stations in Kansas and Missouri. Today is July 30, 2025. We're at the Kansas Statehouse to interview three noteworthy people, John Marshall, Dave Ranney, and Mike Shields, three journalists who covered Kansas politics and state government from various news outlets from weekly newspapers to daily newspapers including the *Hutchinson News*, *Salina Journal*, *Wichita Eagle*, and *Lawrence Journal-World*. And two of our three guests concluded their reporting careers at the KHI News Service, a nonprofit reporting service started at the Kansas Health Institute, which later evolved into the Kansas News Service.

We'll get deeper into their bios in a moment. Our volunteer videographer is former Kansas State Representative Dave Heinemann. In fact, he was one of the longest-serving legislators in state history. And it seems insufficient to call him a volunteer videographer. He is that, of course, but he's done so many of these, he's verging on professional status.

This interview is part of the Kansas Oral History Project's series exploring the contributions of reporters, editors, press secretaries, and others involved in providing the public information about state and local policy making during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The Kansas Oral History Project is a nonprofit corporation that collects and preserves oral histories of Kansans. The project is supported by donations from generous individuals and occasional grants.

Let's start with you, John. You grew up in Lincoln, [KS] right?

John Marshall: I grew up in Lincoln, went to the University of Kansas, graduated from the journalism school there, and I'd been a summer intern in Rochester, New York for the *Times Union*. Rochester was, in size, a bit like Kansas City. Rochester/Monroe County, had a population of about a million. Anyway, I was an intern there, and I took a full-time job with them after I graduated. I was there for about a year full time, a little more than a year, and then moved back to Salina and started with *The Salina Journal*.

I called Whitley Austin and asked him for a job. I was dissatisfied with what was going on in New York. I just called him out of the blue. His son and I were in school together, and he said, "How much do you want and when do you want to come to work?" I said, "Well, you kind of caught me off guard." Anyway—

JMc: Tell people who Whitley Austin was.

JM: Whitley Austin was a legendary, magnificent editor of *The Salina Journal*, twice a Pulitzer Prize juror, a former chairman of the Board of Regents. He was distinguished, multilingual. He spoke French fluently. He was also the first man I ever met who spoke Latin. He could actually speak Latin, and that's another story involving another Latin speaker I met later on. He was

ferociously educated, and all of the people that I worked for in the Harris Group were incredibly well educated, most of them multilingual. Stu Awbrey also spoke French.

Anyway, I went to work for *The Salina Journal*, and I covered northwestern Kansas. Mr. Austin believed that the more often you weren't at your desk, the better. I traveled a lot. I was sometimes gone for a week or ten days and often sent stories from the road.

JMc: It was your native part of the state. You were from western Salina.

JM: I was out as far northwest as Saint Francis, Goodland, Colby.

JMc: People always think that Hays is western Kansas, but it's not, really.

JM: No. Hays is still kind of in the east. I always say western Kansas doesn't start until Lane County, Dighton. But, anyway, I worked at *The Salina Journal* for almost five years, going into the end of 1974 and the election. Then I was transferred to Topeka and was a Statehouse correspondent for the Harris Newspaper Group for two years. Then I was transferred—moved back to Hutchinson to be Sunday editor, business editor, night managing editor, and later executive editor of both newspapers, *The Hutchinson News* morning edition and the evening paper.

JMc: We'll get more into this later, but that's interesting in and of itself that there were that many managerial positions at *The Hutch*[*inson*] *News* then compared to the state of Kansas newspapers today. It was a fairly big, substantial paper, well-read across western Kansas.

JM: Well, it was. And *The Salina Journal* was its counterpart to northwest Kansas, the same kind of situation. The morning paper was the big paper in Hutchinson. It was a separate staff, separate press room, separate composing room. The only staff that worked for both newspapers was the advertising staff. The newsrooms turned over about 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon. The morning paper had a circulation of about 35,000 in twenty-some counties and went into Colorado and Oklahoma. And the afternoon paper, the afternoon *Hutchinson News* had a circulation of about 15,000, just for Hutchinson and Reno County. So, it was a wide, a big—it was probably in circulation the third largest paper.

JMc: I know you got a stint, too, as the publisher in Olathe [KS] before you got to the Statehouse. We can talk more about your experiences at the Statehouse in a bit.

JM: Sure. After Hutchinson, I went to Olathe and was the editor and publisher of *The Daily News of Johnson County* in Olathe for about six years. And then came the idea to expand and broaden the scope of Harris News Service. The Harris Group had thirteen newspapers in six states and an equal number of radio stations in states from Illinois to Texas, Colorado, Kansas, Iowa. So, there were about thirty newspapers and radio stations involved in it. The news service was a way to transmit a syndicated wire service to all these outlets. All the columns—they were bulk buys—all of the columns that were carried in newspapers, The Bridge column, Dr. Quack,

the doctors and all *The Washington Post* writers' group, whatever. It came through Harris News Service and was sent out to the—I don't know if you want to get into the expansion now or not.

JMc: Let's wait just a little bit for that. That's a good background. I do want to talk a little bit about the influence of the Harris papers in this state in particular, and all three of you share some of that history. So, Mike Shields, born in Ark[ansas] City [KS].

Mike Shields: Yes.

JMc: Moved around a bit, went to the Navy.

MS: Yes.

JMc: Came out of the Navy.

MS: Yes.

JMc: And started your journalistic career after that. So, pick it up from there.

MS: Well, when I was at Wichita State [University], Les Anderson was a professor there. Les also had the *Ark Valley News*, which he had started with his wife Nancy. Les was probably a very early academic advocate of what they call community journalism. He was a fun, interesting, and hard-working guy, and most of the students wanted to work for him at some point. I was working for the railroad in the evenings, getting through school, and he offered me a job. Of course, it was general assignment, day reporter. So, I started work there, and I didn't really tell him I was working nights.

Then there was one time I came straight from work to the newspaper work, and I got there before anybody else, and they had a desk at the back of the office of the Circulation Room. I thought, "Well, I'll just lay down for about fifteen minutes."

JMc: Take a nap, yes.

MS: So, I stretched out on the table, and somebody shook my arm probably at about 10:30 in the morning and said, "We didn't want to wake you up, but we need the table."

JMc: They didn't need you to go do anything. They just needed the table."

MS: They needed the table. But Les was a wonderful guy. Everybody there was. So, I worked there. And then Bill Meyer was looking for a reporter—

DR: With the *Marion Record*.

JMc: The legendary Bill Meyer in Marion.

MS: Bill Meyer at the *Marion Record*. He and his wife Joan ran that newspaper, which was still owned by the Hoch family, which is a long history-distinguished.

JMc: But you got a history and journalism degree from Wichita State, right?

MS: Yes. I actually was most interested in history. I had a friend—I was kind of a not-on-point type of student. I had a friend that was into history. He directed me to some of those classes with really quite amazing professors. I got very engaged with them. My grades wouldn't show it, but I got very—so, I ended up with a degree in history, but I thought, "I'm going to have to have a job" because I promised my wife I'd never make less than I made on the railroad. So, that's how I got into the journalism program at Wichita State.

I worked for Bill not for very long, about six months. He offered me a raise from $650 a month to $1,000 a month, and I thought, "Well, gosh, that will get me a little closer to what I promised Aurora." So, I went to work there, and who's working down the road but Dave Ranney at the *Hillsboro Star-Journal*."

JMc: That's when you guys met?

MS: Yes, that's where we met.

Dave Ranney: That's where we competed.

MS: A friendly competition.

DR: Oh, yes.

MS: Bill, he was at a stage in his career where he liked to travel some and would come up on an anniversary of whatever anniversary it was of D-Day, and he'd fought at the Battle of the Bulge and was very—anyway, he took off. He left me ostensibly in charge because there wasn't much harm I could do, I'm sure.

But the one mistake he made was I was able to look at the books because I'd been bugging him. I want to take the job. "Yeah, I'll do it for $1,000 a month, but I'm going to be in here every month asking for a raise." I'd go in and ask for a raise, and he'd say, "I just can't do it."

JMc: You looked at the books.

MS: I looked at the books, and when he got back, I said, "Hey!"

JMc: "You can do it."

MS: "You can do it." Well, he was kind of tight.

MS: At the same time, my wife was still going to school at Wichita State. I had to drive back and forth to Wichita looking for freelance work to augment my income. There was a place called the [*American*] *Oil and Gas Reporter*, and I would do pieces for them. They were in that old strip mall that Willard Garvey had built over on Edgemoor.

Anyway, I'd come out of that office with my $50 freelance check, and I noticed as I was walking to the car there was a little place, *City Life* magazine. So, I stuck my head in there, and I said, "Do you guys have any freelance work?"

They were barely holding it together. The guy that started it was a guy named Carl Mar. His family had the Mar Gardens Chinese place in downtown Wichita. So, we talked a little bit, and he said, "Well, I can't afford to pay you anything." He said, "What I am really is a graphic designer. If you'll do the editorial, I'll make you a 50 percent partner." I said, "What?" He said, "Yeah." It's kind of ridiculous really.

DR: That's quite a jump from the *Marion Record* to *City*.

JMc: Yes.

DR: It's *City Life* or Light?

MS: *City Life* magazine. It was an all slick—because he was a graphic designer, and he wanted it to be splendid, and he was spending a fortune on printing, and he couldn't make enough money to cover his printing. So, I got in. I bought in for a dollar to make it legal; we signed a contract. That partnership lasted for about six weeks, and then Carl said, "You think you know so much. You just take it."

So, I gave him another dollar and then found an investor that was a friend of a guy I played basketball with. His family owned the Grede Foundries, mostly up in Wisconsin, and he had a literary bent, and he said, "Okay." He really bankrolled it until we got it going. We didn't make a profit until about two-and-a-half years it took us to break even and start showing a slim profit.

JMc: But you left there and went to the Harris News Service from there, right?

MS: Yes, I got into it with Bruce, my partner, because—I can't remember why. I left there and was offered a consulting job with Bob Langenwalter who was doing Larksfield Place for the Wesley Foundation. I did that for a while. This really could go on and on and on.

JMc: It could.

MS: I think I need to cut to the chase.

JMc: We'll get back to Harris News Service, but eventually after the consulting gig, you then joined the Harris News Service, right?

MS: Yes, thanks to Dave. Dave had taken a job with Harris, and he gave my name to John, and I had quit Larksfield Place. You really don't want to get into that, I don't think.

JMc: Okay, Dave Ranney, we've already established the fact that you two were competitors as weekly newspaper guys there, but to get to you specifically, a KU graduate in 1972, Wichita born and bred.

DR: Yes.

JMc: You never set out to be a journalist. You were a bleeding heart in social services, had a sociology degree, took a job, what as being an advocate for the—

DR: I was a charter employee at Cottonwood, Inc. when it opened.

JMc: And Cottonwood is what?

DR: Cottonwood is the Douglas County program for developmentally-disabled adults, not children, but adults. I went to work there. Just like Mike, I couldn't make enough money to keep going. At the time, this was all brand new, and you have to understand special ed[ucation] had not kicked in yet. There was this brewing discussion about, "What are we going to do with these"—the term was "mentally retarded" adults. As a society, we weren't doing anything, and you were expected to keep your Down syndrome child at home. Don't bother society.

So, there were information and referral grants that were available. Cottonwood helped me apply for one. I got a grant to work with this association. They called it ARC, Association for Retarded Citizens, there in Seneca, Kansas, Nemaha County. I went there, got a grant, started what today is the Nemaha County Training Center, did that.

There's just a cute story. The slogan for the—the chamber of commerce had a contest, and they had a billboard on the outside of town. The contest was to come up with a slogan for the billboard that they were going to put up.

JMc: To advertise the community.

DR: And two entries, I later found out, two of the entries that had no connection with each other said, "Seneca, Home of the State's Worst Newspaper." I'm at the sheltered workshop, and I approached the guy about—let me back up. I started a sheltered workshop with a typewriter and typing paper. In those days, you could apply for grants, and there was a formula, this topic, this topic, this topic, and I did it, and I got several thousand dollars with what I call the power of the written word.

JMc: Yes.

DR: So, I went from there. I went to the newspaper, which was a terrible newspaper, and I said, "Would you be up for"—I was basically asking for freelance, and he was like, "Oh, sure, write anything you want." So, I did. I wound up covering city hall. I wound up covering the school board all at the same time. I remember that I went to—I started covering teacher negotiations. If you can imagine—

JMc: Is this while you were doing the other work at the same time?

DR: Yes. So, I'm covering teacher negotiations, and I'll never forget it. I'm sitting there with all the stuff going on, and this guy goes, the school board member tells the rest of the School Board, he says, "You cannot get a kindergarten teacher from K-State [Kansas State University], with a degree from K-State, you can't get them here for less than $13,000."

I was like, "Well, shit, I'm making 9." It was like, "Okay." So, I approached—it's a long story, but I approached the guy, the publisher, Dan Diehl was his name. He had a longstanding—the

two bankers in Axtell and Bern, Kansas, which are small towns outside of Seneca, they were brothers-in-law, and they both wanted newspapers. They had both come to Dan and wanted more coverage. They wanted to promote their communities.

So, Dan had always turned them down. I came to him and he said, "Well, I'll bankroll the *Axtell-Bern Reporter*." So, I got out of social work, went into journalism, worked sixty hours a week.

JMc: Oh, at least, yes. In the resume that you supplied prior to doing the interview, you graduated from college, and the mission statement in your head was you were out to save the world like a lot of people at the time. So, at the time, you thought that was social services. But later that obviously morphed into journalism. You made a reputation over your entire career for reporting on social services in a way that really nobody in the state has ever equaled. You carried that with you into journalism.

DR: I was in weekly journalism for eight years, and it was *Axtell-Bern*, and then—

JMc: Neodesha.

DR: Neodesha after that and then Hillsboro after that. And divide eight years by three newspapers, and I again was just struggling for income. The daily always appealed to me. "I wonder if I could make more money at a daily newspaper." One thing led to another, and I did some freelance for *The Hutch News*, just—we had those Radio Shack model 100 things.

MS: Tandy.

DR: I just did a couple of stories just to get used to the equipment, the telephone line, and what editors were like and just very, very general, brief. I'm talking about two stories. And this is a true story. I hope John agrees with it.

JMc: We'll see. That's part of the reason why I wanted all three of you together.

DR: I'm having trouble with my publisher because he was all about authority but would take no responsibility.

JMc: This is Hillsboro?

DR: Yes. And that's not a nice thing to say, but we were—and I was like, "Am I in charge or not? If you want it, then take responsibility. But don't be squawking to me about why we didn't get this ad or why"—No. If I'm going to run the paper, I'm going to run the paper. If you want all this stuff, then you take it back.

JMc: So, you and Mike both had a history of quarreling with—

MS: Well, just frank discussions.

DR: So, the Kansas Press Association sends out a newsletter or whatever, and my publisher is reading the newspaper. He comes to this paragraph about Harris Enterprises starting a news

service. I swear to god I'm not making this up. He goes [scornful laugh], rolls his eyes, and he says, "This is something you'd be interested in" and flips it on my desk.

JMc: This loser idea.

DR: I read it, and I was like, "Oh, my god" because I could do my social work through this news.

JMc: Through journalism.

DR: The power of the written word. I mean, the Harris chain was—but I was a weekly editor. I had no street cred or anything. So, he left the room, I swear to god, I took a piece of paper. I put it in my typewriter which was right here, and I said, "Dear Mr. Marshall, if you're interested in me, I'm interested in you." I didn't send you a big-ass resume or anything. That's all.

Three days later, a short time later, John calls, "Well, let's get together, blah, blah, blah, and talk." So, I wound up getting hired. I really think the reason was that both Mike and I got hired is we were weekly editors. We didn't need people looking over us. We could both do photography. We could do whatever needed to be done. It was great.

JMc: Do you agree with that, John?

JM: Yes, I agree with that. What's interesting about these two guys, probably the best at the time, let's say the mid-eighties through the nineties that they worked for me or with me, they were probably the best at what they do not just in Kansas, in this part of the country. I've never worked with two better reporters who also could write. You know, a lot of reporters—anyway.

JMc: Yes.

JM: And the one thing that interested me, I went to probably a half-dozen of the Harris papers in Kansas. A lot of people had applied for work for this start-up.

JMc: Supplying more information than Dave did.

JM: Yes. They sent resumes, and I went to Parsons, to Garden City, to Hays, places to interview these people. These guys won out because one of the things I like to ask a reporter, one thing I asked both of them, I said, "I don't really give a damn about their string book," what they've done in the past, other than to see if they could put a sentence together, but I'd say, "What do you read? What are you reading right now? What authors interest you? Just tell me some stories about what you've read. And what do you like to do? Do you like to travel?" and just have a conversation with them and see if they can—if they have more than one brain. Dave has probably three brains. Mike, I don't know how many brains Mike has.

JMc: He keeps it a secret. He tries.

MS: 0.5.[laughing]

JM: They could report, and they could write. What you do is you hire good people and get out of their way. They made me look pretty good. So, I had no problems.

DR: A real quick story. You can cut this if you want. John calls. We're going to meet. I have a vacation planned in the Ozarks. I'm married and have kids. So, we go to the Ozarks, and while we're gone, Governor Docking dies. Bob Docking dies while I'm gone.

Well, I'm in the Ozarks. There's no Internet. I'm not seeing a newspaper. So, I come back and John calls and we set up a meeting at the truck stop in McPherson [KS], which was kind of halfway. John asked me ideas of what I would like to do, whatever, and I said, "Well, you know what I think would be really cool would be to do like these *Rolling Stone* interviews with Kansans of significance, like Bob Docking. Wouldn't it be cool to do a *Rolling Ston*e interview with Bob Docking?"

JMc: Yes, he was no longer in office, right?

DR: Yeah, just like today, I think it would be great for somebody to do an interview with Kathleen Sebelius.

JMc: Sam Brownback.

DR: Or Steve Morris or Mike Hayden. They're interesting Kansans. I want to know what they—anyway, I said, "John, wouldn't it be cool to do a *Rolling Stone* interview with Bob Docking?" and John goes, "Well, he's dead." And I said, "Well, so"—

JMc: That would be even better if you could interview him after death.

JM: It would be a hell of an interview.

DR: I said, "Well, is this interview over then?" because how could I be so stupid as to propose a—everybody knew that Bob Docking was dead but me.

JMc: That kind of leads us into a conversation. You all referenced it, and John kind of laid it out, how significant the Harris system was. It wasn't just Kansas. It was other states. But focusing in on Kansas, you had *The Hutch News*, *The Salina Journal*, the *Parsons Sun*, *Garden City*.

JM: The *Ottawa Herald*.

JMc: The *Ottawa Herald*, Hays, Olathe.

DR: Chanute.

JM: We had eight daily newspapers in Kansas.

JMc: That was the days still, probably the tail end, but you still had significant editors at those newspapers—Clyde Reed in Parsons, right?

JM: Yes.

JMc: You referenced the people in Hutchinson. So, you were tied into the Harris trade and had worked at various places. You brought these guys in foundationally to start the Harris News Service.

JM: Yes.

JMc: Which was—you really focused primarily, didn't you, on the Statehouse, didn't you?

JM: Yes. The idea in the beginning, the idea was to have a reporter for the east, the state in Topeka, and one in central Kansas, and one in the west covering issues in those three regions. But it quickly became apparent that well, we're all one, big family, and there's an awful lot going on in Topeka that affects everybody. When I say "we," the news service, did travel. Mike is bilingual, and he traveled to the southwest often enough. But the idea was to report issues of significance. Whether they were in the daily news cycle and the stampedes for headlines.

JMc: The papers had the AP [Associated Press] and maybe even UPI [United Press International] for that, right? You wanted to do more in-depth, investigative work.

JM: I was telling you earlier that Lew Ferguson and I used to go to these little breakfast—

JMc: Right. Lew Ferguson who headed the AP Bureau here, legendary in Kansas.

JM: Right. And Lew and I would go to these little breakfast meetings and make a program, a presentation. Lew always used to say, "The AP is the meat and potatoes. Harris News is the dessert." I suppose that's right. I found that Dave's reporting on social issues was the first time that we could raise the consciousness of almost the entire community of Kansas. He raised the consciousness, made this an issue, made this something that people talked about and were concerned with, including legislators, especially legislators. It wasn't just one big splash. It was a constant drumbeat of "Here's this story. Here's another story."

JMc: John, that lasted through the last day of his job in 2015, that constancy of his reporting.

JM: Yes.

JMc: And his Rolodex, the number of contacts he had were just incredible.

JM: The kind of reporting you did, and Dave gets tired of me bringing this up, but the reporting he did on Ruby Marshall.

DR: Yes.

JM: Ruby Marshall was a woman who had been convicted of murder, was in the state women's prison. Dave can fill you in on the details, but his series of articles, his articles about her situation brought about the use of the battered wife syndrome. His stories about her abuse, "I can't take it anymore," she kills her husband, but why? What led up to that? Well, she was a battered woman. She was a battered wife. And the attorney general, Bob Stephan, did he commute her sentence, or did he pardon her?

DR: It was the parole board.

JM: The parole board.

DR: Yes.

JM: Dave can tell you more about that, but he helped her get out of prison.

JMc: Tell us more about that, Dave.

DR: The story was that I did a lot of stories about domestic violence. That was a new topic at the time.

JMc: This was roughly speaking, the mid-eighties?

DR: Yes, mid to late. And Ruby Marshall had killed her abuser. That's when the Lisa Dunn murders had taken place and Danny Remeta, and that's a whole other story. But it raised the issue of abused women whose crimes involved their abusers, what is justice? How do we define how they should be sentenced? Joan Finney was governor, and she liked my stories. So, it became—okay. So, Lisa Dunn was in the news at the time, and the question became, "How many other women are there in prison that met the same criteria?"

So, I called around, and there was a woman named Ruby Marshall, an African American, Wyandotte County, from the South fell in with this guy who took all her money and was very abusive and all that. He was going to kill her, and she killed him. He was drunk and violent and all this, and she killed him, and the system just threw her away. She was guilty. She killed him. They threw her away.

So, I went to prison, and I interviewed Ruby and did stories. Went to the Wyandotte County Courthouse, pulled her file, went all through it, which no one would do today.

JMc: A series of articles that described her situation.

JM: Trial transcripts, police records.

DR: Yes, I went through it all and wrote it out there. So, Ruby is nervous, and she says, "You know, would you mind not running that until after I go before the parole board because I don't know. I don't want to make anybody mad," blah, blah, blah. I say that, but the parole board was meeting like three days later. It wasn't a big delay. I said, "Yes, I can do that."

JMc: This was after you'd already done some stories?

DR: No, I hadn't. I'd done all the precede work on it. And John I think was waiting for the story. But, anyway, she wanted it delayed, and I said, "Yes, not a long time, but just a couple of days." So, she goes before the parole board, gets turned down. Then the stories run.

Then I'm in Topeka for something, and in those days, somebody like me could go to the prison, tell them who I was, and they would let me in. You can't do that today. I don't know if you can even get out of your car today. But I did that, and I went to this group that was the one who had referred me to Ruby, and, man, there was like this electricity in the air. People are looking at me like—I'm like, "What is going on?" It was the weird vibe. It turned out the parole board had read

the stories and paroled Ruby. They gave her thirty, sixty days, something like that to come up with a reintegration plan, but boom. And then I walk in. This is the same day.

JMc: So, your stories actually led to her parole.

DR: Yes.

JMc: Very quickly after she had been denied.

DR: Yes.

JMc: You still sound a little bit emotional about that.

DR: Oh, my god, yes.

MS: He did a story at the [*Lawrence*] *Journal-World* the next day. They fired Thelma Hunter Gordon.

JMc: Yes. Then, Mike, John's specialty, as I recall, you're legendary for your knowledge of the school finance system and wrote extensively about it.

JM: Yes. Well, actually that began in 1988. The reason I say it is I remember clearly how this all began. It was a quiet day, and Dave Kerr, the senator from Hutchinson at that time—

JMc: Before he was Senate president.

JM: Yes. I think he had just been re-elected, and he approached me. Now, Dave was known for constantly bitching about unfunded KPERs retirement plan. People just got tired of hearing him, but he was a good senator and a smart guy, also a Shakespeare scholar.

JMc: So, he met your criteria on that front.

JM: Well, Dave came up to me, and I knew him. I'd lived in Hutchinson for—he started talking about the constitutional amendments that had been approved—property classification and reappraisal.

JMc: Right.

JM: And federal income tax reform. He was talking about how these things are just going to turn the entire school finance system on its ear, and there are going to be riots.

JMc: Because the financial of the individual school districts is based on the valuation, the tax valuation.

JM: Yes. At that time, I had no idea what he was talking about. I kind of, I didn't have any idea about it. So, I called Dale Dennis.

JMc: Of course.

JM: The school finance director for the Department of Education, and I said, "Dale, I don't know a damn thing about school finance. I pretend that I do, but I don't really. Would you help me out?"

This was in the late spring, and he said, "Sure." I went to Topeka, and I spent—he took time, a solid eight-and-a-half or nine hours, I went to school with Dale. He went through the school finance program line by line with me. I took notes. He said, "You'll have to come back. We'll wrap it up tomorrow."

So, I went back in in the morning, and we got out at about 1:00. This was the old—this wasn't the reform yet. This was the old plan. I wanted to understand what was going on now.

JMc: This is when Dale would distribute to every legislator including the aforementioned Dave Heinemann a print-out that showed them how their school district was going to fare under this plan.

JM: Yes, and we had a law that was passed in 1973 called the School Equalization Act, and that was what was enforced now. But school finance was based on the wealth of school districts, property wealth, and income. And property valuation was part of it, a big part of it. And income valuation was kind of secondary at that time.

Well, with federal tax reform, it exposed more Kansas income to taxation. So, all of a sudden, income became 55 or 60 percent of the formula and property valuation. Hutchinson School District, for example, overnight became a no-aid district. In other words, people were going to have to pay a hell of a lot more. That's what Dave was talking about. It finally happened. And there were enormous—there was an enormous battle.

But that's how I got involved in it. Eventually what I did was I developed an Excel program that captured all of the elements of school finance.

JMc: You had your own spreadsheet.

JM: I had my own print-out. I modeled it after Dale's and for every school district that all of our newspapers covered. So, if a guy gets up and offered a proposal to change the special ed weighted enrollment something, some little part of it, increase it 2 percent, I could go back to the office and put in +2, and everything would line up, and it would say, "This is what So and So's proposal would do to school finance in your area."

JMc: Hutch, Salina, Ottawa, wherever.

JM: Wherever, yes. It took a long time to develop that, and I ran it by Dale. I said, "Is this going to work? Can I actually tell people that this is going to happen?" and he said, "Looks pretty good to me, buddy."

JMc: That's Dale.

JM: Yes. There were a lot of—that was the most dramatic reform happening at that time, the whole thing with Judge Bullock.

JMc: That came later on.

JM: I can tell you right now that the House version of the school finance bill passed on March 11, 1992. I remember that.

JMc: That's amazing.

JM: The Senate screwed around with it for a month and a half. They came to an agreement later on at the end of May. That was the most emotionally fraught, difficult, sweat-stained session I had ever seen, the session of '92 when they passed it because everybody was affected, and nobody was really satisfied.

JMc: Wasn't '92 one of the two years that Democrats were in charge of the House?

JM: Yes. Marvin Barkis was speaker of the House. Rick Bowden was chairman of the House of Education, Joan Wagnon Tax Committee, and Joe Harder was chairman—

JMc: From Moundridge.

JM: From Moundridge was chairman of the Senate Education Committee. And their Conference Committee, the House-Senate Conference Committee on School Finance met in the final days of the session. They met eleven times in three days. And either Governor Finney or Mary Holladay, her chief of staff.

JMc: Daughter and chief of staff.

JM: Daughter and chief of staff, was at every one of those Conference Committee meetings to help the process. I mean, they'd say, "Is the governor going to buy this? If we do this, will the governor"—"Yes" or "No."

DR: Didn't Finney veto the first—

JM: Well, she vetoed one of Mike Hayden's ham-handed attempts we had before the final school finance in '92. In the sessions of '89, and '90 and '91, the House worked really, really hard to come up with a plan and just couldn't. They finally did come up with one plan, and Finney vetoed it.

DR: John, to me, the hero in the school finance drama was Dale Dennis.

JM: Oh, yes.

DR: My god.

JM: Yes.

DR: Just talk about that.

JMc: He's been interviewed by the Oral History Project. He's a state treasure. Everybody will stipulate to that. He's an amazing personality to this day.

JM: He was the patron saint of school finance.

JMc: He was. He knew it backwards and forwards.

JM: He knew everyone. If you go to any school district office in Kansas and mentioned Dale Dennis's name, "Oh, yeah." He's been there. He's talked. They could call him anytime.

MS: He returned phone calls, and he talked to the press, and he was there for—he wanted an informed electorate.

JMc: Mike, we could talk about your work. I don't want to go immediately to Bill Koch and Carla Stovall. We can start with one of the things you mentioned in the information you gave us and I remember this very well, and John will remember this, too, when you were with Harris News Service, the series you did on state water issues.

MS: Well, that was thanks to John. He convinced the papers that we would do a tab, a special tab on water. It was an insert to all the papers.

JM: What was it? Twenty-four pages? Something like that?

MS: Yes.

JMc: A tab is a special publication that you insert into the newspaper.

JM: We had originally planned to sell advertising to pay for the publication of the tab. It's expensive to produce something like that. Charlie Riedel, a photographer who was at the *Hays Daily News*. He's now quite famous for his work. He was with AP in Washington. I think, something like that. Anyway, Charlie was with—I got him to do the photography for this special edition.

JMc: And Mike did all the reporting?

JM: Mike did the reporting. I did a couple of things, but Mike did all the reporting. But we put the paper together in Olathe and then had it printed in Ottawa. I don't know how many hundreds of thousands of copies we made.

MS: Two color fronts.

JM: It was very—I lost my only copy. I don't know where it is.

JMc: How do you remember that, Mike? It was seminal, wasn't it? I mean, you really put the issue—did you put it in context for policy makers?

MS: I hope it did. It was certainly an education for me. People from different parts of the state would talk to me about it. It had some impression. Policy wise, I don't know that it produced any—

JMc: Well, they're still grappling with it.

MS: That's when [Dave] Pope was—

JMc: This exposed the whole notion of the aquifer, the depletion of the aquifer, the groundwater issues.

MS: Yes. We had a series of stories about the number of Kansans that were still reliant on farm wells, a lot of them untested, people that wanted to get a rural water connection that couldn't. We did the stories on the proposed reservoir that later turned into another set of stories about [Gus] Bogina.

JMc: This wasn't the diversion of the Missouri River water to someplace. This predated that.

MS: We covered some of that. But we also covered that at KHI [Kansas Health Institute News Service]. Trevor [at KHI] wrote some pieces about that. We tried [in the Harris News tab] to sandwich in every kind of water issue that we thought had any substance to it. John let all the Harris reporters take the time they needed to fully report something, and then when he talks about good writing, this guy is like the top of the heap as far as I'm concerned. So, when you turn something into an editor like this, I mean, you want your words to sing as much as you can make them, and then he helps it.

JMc: Yes. We all probably had editors that felt like they had to justify their existence by making changes. There were some really good editors who made your copy better.

MS: John was—I had the good luck to work with Les, Bill—every editor I had was a good editor, but John was tops.

JMc: Let's talk a little bit about the Harris papers. When you were with the Harris News Service, and I still remember this. You had so many legislators who had connections to one or another of those communities. It was very influential; the stuff you guys did. So, we're talking about the mid-eighties into the nineties and well beyond that when those papers were very robust, very influential.

But the landscape has changed. You guys can't help but reflect on that a little bit. I remember when I was at the [*Topeka*] *Capitol-Journal*, I was the business editor. I had four reporters. I had a business section. That doesn't exist today. Talk a little about what you've seen in terms of the changes in the media landscape relative to informing the public on these in-depth issues, whether it's the battered wife syndrome, the water issues, the school finance issues. What are people living in these communities today supposed to do? They're not getting that information at the same level, the same amount of detail.

JM: Well, when we were working for the Harris newspapers, the newspapers in Kansas had a combined circulation of roughly 140,000, 145,0000.

JMc: These were the Harris papers.

JM: Yes, the Harris papers, the eight papers, about 145,000 paid subscriptions in Kansas. Now, we had newspapers elsewhere, but in Kansas. Now, essentially they don't exist.

JMc: They're shells of their former selves.

JM: Yes. They've been bought by these hedge funds who load them up with debt and then sell them off. *The Salina Journal* is a totally different building now, part of the hospitals' situation in Kansas.

JMc: And you talked about when you were at *The Hutch News*, you had two editions of the newspaper. You had separate staffs. Now, you're lucky if you have one or two local reporters.

JM: One hundred and fifty people worked at *The Hutchinson News* when I was there total. I don't know. I don't know if anybody works there anymore. What people are relying on now, they have to jump into the rat sewer, the worldwide rat sewer on Fakebook or YouTube, or climb into some silo.

JMc: That wasn't some slip of the tongue. "Fakebook" is what you call it.

JM: Yes. I don't know how they get their information. There are good sources of information out there, but they're very difficult to find. I mean, I doubt very seriously that people—I know people don't read like I do. They don't subscribe to what I—I look on the website of Channel 12 out of Wichita to find out what's the spot news of the day. My god, depending on a television station for that.

JMc: Spoken like a true newspaper purist.

DR: I don't know how to put this into words, but one of the things—

JMc: But you're going to try.

DR: I'm going to try. One of the things that Harris News Service did was it made Kansans aware of Kansas. We went out to do local stories with local people, Kansans. We wrote about Kansans. I was proud to be a Kansan. These are good people. I don't know how else to say it. Today, all that's gone, and we have what I call the Media Triangle, and it's Wichita, Topeka, Kansas City. That's the triangle. Anything that happens after that triangle, outside that triangle, when was the last time you read a story about what was going on in Pittsburg or Hoxie?

JMc: Yes, take your pick.

DR: Yes. I mean, anything outside the Triangle doesn't get covered. It's all gone. Personally, I've just reached the point where "Why are we still in mourning? It's over."

MS: I don't know about that.

JM: I get my news at the barber shop.

JMc: Do you?

JM: Yes.

MS: When I was a reporter—actually, this lasted long enough for the whole time that I was in the business, I always was able to work for a publication that was locally owned. Now virtually every publication outside some of the weeklies is owned—well, John says "hedge funds," I mean, they're all distant, whether they're a hedge fund or—

JMc: Distant ownership.

MS: Right, they're all distant. It used to be the newspapers in Kansas had a very strong local tie from the paperboy up. Everybody had—and most of the small towns and some of them still, people would read the paper front to back. And that I think created a sense of community for people whether they acknowledged it or not. But now there's so many—you don't have—and I'm not going to say every newspaper and everything we ever did was flawless, beautiful journalism, but at least it was done by people that had some professional standards. In our case, we always had our name and phone number on it. If you had a problem with it, if you didn't like it, and people used those. They would call you.

Now I don't know so much what the feedback loop is for the—it seems more of a drive-by reporting.

JMc: Right. It's a bit *caveat emptor*, buyer beware, in terms of the information you get and what do you trust and what you do not. I don't want to get too deeply into this. All of us who have been reporters in journalism, particularly in the last ten, fifteen years, have heard the derisive phrase of the "mainstream media elites," the "liberal media," right? And it's my personal belief that a lot of people who get into journalism—Dave Ranney is a good example—get in for idealistic reasons. They feel like they're doing a public service, and they're, generally speaking, open minded, perhaps progressive spirit, right?

I don't think that the notion that many reporters out there are more liberal in their political leanings is any—I don't think that's wrong, but the whole point that you just made, there was an editorial process at all of these publications, a rigorous, robust, editorial process. There was a notion on the part of all of us who did this job that our personal feelings were to be set aside. We were to cover the news objectively. People use the word "objective." I don't know if anybody's ever totally objective, but the point is, there was a lot of effort put into making the information that we put out trustworthy.

MS: Accurate.

JMc: Accurate. There were a series of checkpoints, editors who would call you on things. That happened at every place.

MS: Absolutely.

JMc: I mean Mike worked for me, but I worked for him. He was the managing editor at the KHI News Service, and he was a great editor, too, and particularly when it came to checking copy for factual information, and bias, and all of that kind of thing. So, I did want people to understand what we've lost in terms of the quality control of the information they're getting out there. You've essentially already weighed in on it.

JM: Well, there's so much happening out there, and what we tried to do before was we had reporters out there finding out what was happening and telling the story of what was happening with accuracy and authority.

JMc: And to some degree, discrimination in the sense that this is more important than that.

JM: We were the filters, newspapers and their editors and their reporters were the collectors and filters of events and would separate the emotion from the event.

JMc: That's a good way of putting it.

JM: It was like a directory. Newspapers were a directory where people could find out what was happening in the courts or the schools or the neighborhoods or their churches, whatever. It's a difficult job to sort through all this crap every day and make sense of it and put it in print, but we—

JMc: In a context that's meaningful for people.

JM: Yes, to explain—I don't think there's a reporter today in Kansas that I know of anybody who really understands—I have yet to read a story that tells me that the reporter understands the local city budget or the county budget and certainly the state budget.

JMc: Well, local reporting has pretty much gone by the wayside.

JM: Yes, for years—they talk about mills, and I can assure you they don't know a damn thing about mills.

JMc: What a mill levy is.

JM: We always tried to explain that to people, a dollar per thousand assessed value. We always put that in parentheses and explained to people in plain language what was happening to their taxes in their local governments. That doesn't happen anymore.

JMc: It's funny. It reminds me. I'll give you one personal anecdote. I want to get in some anecdotes here. Really the greatest compliment ever paid to me in my career, I was the news director of KLKC Radio in Parsons, Kansas, the mighty KLKC. And Clyde Reed was the editor of the *Parsons Sun*, and he was a force to be reckoned with. You guys all knew Clyde Reed, the son of a governor, the son of a US Senator. So, he had a good newspaper. The KU Journalism School, the top graduates would go down there and work for a year or two before they moved on to bigger and better things.

I was the news director of this little radio station, and it happened very rarely, but I beat the newspaper often enough that Clyde Reed marched into the newsroom because it was an afternoon paper. He said, "None of you are going to lunch until you've listened to the news on KLKC, the noon news. If there's anything in that newscast that we don't have in today's paper, you're going to get it." He made them sit at their desks.

Really, I think about that to this day as validation. But the point of it is that there was multiple sources of information for the people in that community about that community. I went to every school board meeting. I went to every county commission meeting. I went to every city commission meeting and took pleasure in doing it and thought I was performing a public service. I think, unless I'm lying, that we all felt that way with what we were doing.

JM: Sure. Yes.

MS: He made me think, at the *Marion Record*, I used to drive up and cover the school board at Lost Springs. They were all kind of. . . dairy farmers. They would fight over a nickel until like 3:00 in the morning. You'd drive back to Marion. Sometimes it would be a snowstorm. But as a reporter, you get a lot of respect for—

JMc: The people who serve in those positions in local communities.

MS: Exactly. It's not just the newspapers have diminished in stature, but also I think a lot of people have a dim view of government in general, and they don't necessarily associate government with—

JMc: Their neighbors.

MS: Right, exactly. I think a weekly newspaper that goes up and covers the school board that's on the fringe of its circulation area and devotes a resource to that, that tells everybody it's a thing of significance. It's important. Somebody might try to do that today with a blog, I suppose, but I doubt they're going to be at every school board meeting and sit there for five hours to listen.

JMc: Right.

MS: Who's got the stamina for that unless it's—

JMc: I loved every minute of it.

MS: Well, I can't say I loved every minute.

JMc: I'd go to Oswego to the county commission meeting in Labette County. I'd cover them in the morning, go hit golf balls at the driving range with the associate district judge. It was a great life. Local journalism is a great life.

DR: Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think a big difference between yesterday and today is that just the simple returning of phone calls. Bob Harder always returned my phone calls. Rochelle Chronister always returned my phone calls.

JMc: Bob Harder, one of the longest-serving cabinet secretaries in the history of the state, Social and Rehabilitation Services.

DR: And just, I mean, the idea of a reporter talking to a cabinet secretary was not a big deal. That's what we did.

JMc: John was telling me earlier that Bob Bennett when he was governor had a press conference during the session every day.

JM: Every day, 9 AM.

DR: And today, you have to go through all the—

JMc: John Carlin once a week, Bill Graves—Bill Graves used to have press conferences, and whenever the television media would pack up to leave, John Hanna of the Associated Press and I would go up to his desk and talk to him for another twenty minutes. And he never, never—he was there to answer every question you asked of him, right?

And then started the era of the press secretary interrupting the news conference saying, "One more question. One more," like "Times up," right? And it's been changing ever since. But in your day at the Statehouse you had direct access to the governor, to cabinet officials.

JM: The first time I was in Topeka, there were fourteen—if I recall right—fourteen full-time Statehouse correspondents from radio, television, and newspapers.

JMc: And wire services.

JM: Yes, and wire services. There were fourteen of us. Most of the time, the governor's press conference would have—there'd be ten or twelve people at that press conference. We sat at a long table and asked him questions for however long he wanted to—sometimes the meetings would last ten minutes, fifteen minutes because we didn't have anything, nothing pressing. But oftentimes they'd run an hour or an hour and a half.

JMc: And he would just sit there and answer questions.

JM: He would answer, and Leroy Towns would finally—because the governor probably really did have a meeting that he needed to go to, would say, "Guys, people, that's it." It was informal, but very professional.

JMc: I remember sitting next to Dave Ranney when he got into an argument with Governor Hayden.

JM: Oh, yes.

JMc: That was the budget briefing.

JM: That was in a room—

JMc: Yes, it was near here. It was a budget briefing because in those days, the governor held a special briefing of the budget for reporters only so that we understood what was in the document, could ask questions, and could report on it accurately. It was in a budget briefing, sitting around a conference table. I don't remember the particulars, but you challenged him on something.

DR: He had some budget cuts that were going to affect people with disabilities.

JMc: I should have known.

DR: I was getting heavily lobbied on those issues to go into those meetings—this is the way I remember it.

JMc: All your sources calling you, saying, "Make sure to ask the governor about this."

DR: Yes. So, I go to the meeting, and this is the way I remember it. John is correct. We're sitting at this big, long rectangle, and there are only two seats left, and they're the two by the podium or whatever, where the governor is going to stand, that seat and the next one over. And I'm sitting in the next one over, if you're sitting next to me because John is on this side.

And Mike Hayden goes into this budget thing, and he brushes over social services like "We're not going to go there." So, I asked some question, and he made the point about the budget took care of the truly vulnerable or something like that, and I said, "What do you mean by truly vulnerable? Who are these people that you're saying"—

Well, what I didn't mention is that over here facing us is this bank of TV cameras. So, the plan is for this to be on the 6:00 News and whatever. So, what runs in Wichita but the confrontation between me and the governor. I remember he got real red in the face.

JM: Oh, yeah.

DR: He was pissed.

JMc: He was a colorful guy, I tell you, that Mike Hayden. I still remember conference committees when he was Speaker of the House, and he would pick the smallest room to make it uncomfortable for people. He'd come in, put his chaw, his bag of Red Man chewing tobacco on the negotiating table and his spittoon, and then commence negotiating. It was really great fun to cover him.

DR: I actually thought Mike Hayden was a good governor.

MS: I did, too. I mean, not the chummiest, but he was certainly policy-wise—

JMc: He knew his stuff.

MS: They came in with kind of a game plan, if I remember correctly.

JMc: Right.

MS: Ed Flentje had written a policy book.

JMc: A policy book when Mike was speaker in preparation for the campaign to be governor.

MS: They did Kansas Development Finance Authority.

JMc: Right.

MS: You could go through that book pretty much—

JMc: The highway plan.

MS: Everything in the playbook.

JMc: The water plan. He had a water plan.

DR: Cheyenne Bottoms.

MS: I think that stuff was collectively, not just the property tax thing, but collectively, I think it was enough to kind of guarantee him only one term.

JMc: Those constitutional amendments, you refer to property tax changes. The vote occurred when Carlin was heading out of office, and Hayden had the problem of implementing those things. The property tax changes in particular were not popular.

JM: Hayden was caught by that perfect storm I mentioned before. The government federal tax reform and the implementation of classification, property classification and reappraisal.

JMc: Right, exactly.

JM: People were looking at property tax bills that were double, triple, quadruple what they had before.

JMc: Depending on the class of property you're talking about, right.

JM: And he was governor at the time. So, they're going to blame him. He called a special session at the end of '89, and I think he was just caught.

JMc: That was for the highway plan, wasn't it?

JM: No, '87, '89—there were several special sessions. This one happened after Bob Stephan had told everybody, "Just don't pay your property taxes. We'll work it out later." Well, the court said you can't do that. But he expected, and Mike and Dave were there, he expected us to rewrite—he expected us, the people, the legislature to rewrite the history of a hundred years of tax law in three days. It couldn't happen. And then each time the legislature tried to reform, there was the Dave Kerr plan. There were all of these plans using the existing school—Mike Hayden just got caught with it.

JMc: Yes, he did.

JM: He just got caught at that. And then the phrase "Tax Hike Mike"—

That was—so, anyway, it upset him. That first debate at the State Fair in September of ’90, and Joan Finney would just walk out on the stage and gave him a roundhouse right to the jaw, knocked him flat, speaking figuratively.

JMc: Right.

JM: That was it.

JMc: Nothing specific, but any issue or memory or anecdote of your time at the Statehouse stick out in your mind other than the Ranney confrontation with Governor Hayden.

DR: That was thirty seconds.

JM: Well, we used to play darts in our press room at times. Ken Peterson of the *Topeka Capital* and I. We had a dartboard over in the closet, and so you had to throw the dart—if there was anybody at the UPI desk, they just had to duck. So, we got pretty good at darts.

And one day, we were playing darts, the governor, Bennett, had the habit of just dropping in on people on Friday afternoon. It was the end of the week and just dropping in on people. “What’s going on? How are you doing?” That sort of thing. I had thrown a dart. I knew I was going to win except that it stuck in the desk leg just as Governor Bennett walked in the room. If it had been two or three seconds later, I would have got him in the knee. Well, we kind of laughed about that, but it made John Petterson’s column the following Sunday.

JMc: Was John writing for the [*Wichita*] *Eagle* in those days?

JM: He was writing for the *Eagle* at that time. Fortunately, he didn’t name me. He just said “an errant dart landed next to the governor’s right knee.”

DR: A point that I wanted to make or would like to make is that what’s often overlooked is the true, I’m not talking about journalism now, I’m talking about the true public servants that we were exposed to in government, I mean, really, really good people. I’m thinking like Bob Harder.

JMc: Right.

DR: Duane Gossen.

JM: Dick Ryan.

JMc: Dale Dennis.

DR: I just don’t think most Kansans realize—I mean, today, everybody is so skeptical and so negative and critical, and government can’t do anything right.

MS: Harris, I don’t know if the stories would be considered more memorable, but we got to write stories that were—we didn’t just try to nail people. John would write very good pieces about these public servants that Dave was talking about. I can remember writing a piece about the

chairman—I can't remember what committee it was now—but a particularly good chairman who was very fair and listened.

JMc: So, writing a story on how he was fair and bipartisan.

MS: Yes. We didn't just—

JMc: I remember the same thing. I remember writing a story. It was Senator Dwayne Umbarger from southeast Kansas. It was the beginning of the No Tax Pledge era, and he signed a no tax increase pledge running for the legislature because that's what people did. He got up here, learned about the issues, and said, "That's not a responsible position," and he voted for a tax increase, I think specifically for schools or something.

MS: He really did step up.

JMc: I remember writing a profile, kind of a Profile in Courage, here's a guy who said this, did this, had to go home and explain himself to his voters but was willing to do that, the kind of story you're talking about where you—maybe process stories. You wanted to educate people about the process and the people who populate it because as Dave said, there were some admirable people. Fred Kerr, Dave's brother.

JM: Oh, yes.

JMc: When he was the majority leader in the Senate, any time I did an interview, I'd signal him on the Senate floor. He'd go to the cloakroom. I'd get the interview and he'd go back on the floor. That kind of collegiality really characterized this place. They respected the media, knew the media had a job to do. I think the relationship, although adversarial, was respectful by nature.

JM: Oh, yes. Legislators in those days had a shared purpose. In spite of their party label, they had a mission. Whether it was court reform or school finance reform or a highway plan, they worked together, not always without argument.

JMc: Of course not.

JM: One person I was going to tell you about was Dick Ryan. Every Martin Luther King Day, I would go over to his office. Dick Ryan was the head of Legislative Research. We would go through the budget, the state budget line by line, and the best part about it was the coffee and cigars. He had the most beautiful cigars. Anyway, we would go through the budget, and I would ask him questions about it, and he would explain it, and then I would go back to the office and take a week or ten days to write a—I always wrote a six- or seven-part series on the budget every year, where the money comes from, where it goes.

JMc: Again, something you'd never see today.

JM: No. Different categories. I'd try to keep each article focused on, say, the General Fund or on schools, whatever. But Dick Ryan gave up his—I think he was grateful for it, but it was

always—it was fun and interesting. And Alan Conroy then would come in and chime in now and then.

JMc: Who became the director of Legislative Research later.

JM: Yes.

JMc: And Mike, I think if I understand correctly, one of the big advantages, what really helped your reporting career at the Statehouse was that you were a smoker. You'd go out on the balcony with Speaker Shallenburger or whoever else.

MS: Not only that, I was a drinker.

JMc: And Senator Emert from Independence. You'd get some information. You and Martin Hawver.

MS: Oh, my gosh. Yes, back then—also the Democrats and Republicans, several of them, many of them, enjoyed a smoke and a drink together.

JMc: Yes, they used to do that.

MS: I don't know if that happens anymore. I'm sure it does. Human [nature] hasn't changed that much.

JMc: Well—

JM: The image I always have of this lost era is that several nights every week, if not every night of the week, you would go out of the press room and here would come Marvin Barkis, a Democrat, the Speaker of the House, and Bud Burke, the President of the Senate.

JMc: A Republican.

JM: A Republican, and they'd be walking down the stairs together, chatting it up, having a great time of it.

MS: What about Bill Bunten and Jack Shriver?

JM: Yes.

MS: I mean, those two, those guys essentially wrote the appropriations bills almost between just the two of them. I know it wasn't like that, but they were very chummy.

JMc: You saw a lot of that in the Statehouse in those days.

JM: Bill Wisdom a senator from Wyandotte County. And Jerry Moran, R, Hays got together and cosponsored—they wrote a major measure. This was a Democrat and a Republican. Moran was majority leader of the Senate at the time. He gets together with Wisdom, and they write a proposal to finance the schools through the income tax and eventually phase out the property tax for schools, replace it with an income—they had numbers, research, phase it in year by year. They had the numbers there. They had all kinds of facts and background.

They introduced this in Dave Kerr's Education Committee, and Dave Kerr held hearings on it. There were hearings. Jerry Moran testified and so on. To my surprise, the committee voted the bill out, put it to the floor of the Senate, recommended approval.

Well, Audrey Langworthy who was the chairman of the Senate Tax Committee was absolutely horrified and so was the President of the Senate, Bud Burke. So, he double referred the bill. He referred the bill to the Tax Committee. Anyway, to make a long story short, the bill eventually failed.

JMc: My memory of Bill Wisdom was when he was in the House. He had a penchant for going down to the well on virtually every bill. Yet, he would say when he got there, "I didn't intend to come down and talk." And the entire Chamber would go, "Oh, yes, yes, you did. Yes, you did." He was pretty predictable, a nice guy though.

DR: This is just an anecdote. I'm new to the legislature. I'm up there, mingling, and all the new—I think I'm with Harris. Anyway, I hear all these people talking—the legislators all talk about the events that they went to the previous night, the parties and the whatever. So, I'm looking at this as like "Well, that's where the news is."

So, I talk myself into—people were telling me, "You should come. You should come" to the beer wholesalers annual—

JMc: Was it Neil Whittaker then?

DR: So, I went. And nobody said anything about it. I wasn't stopped. I wasn't kept out or whatever. It was a German buffet, and the beer was like—to this day, that was the coldest, best beer I've ever had.

MS: Oh, you don't get out enough.

JMc: So, cigars for Marshall and beer for Ranney.

DR: And this giant buffet. I was like, "Hey, man, this is all right. Yeah, this is good."

MS: What about the Follies?

DR: Yes. So, then it comes time for the program. And they had a woman—she was national. She wasn't from Kansas. But her son or daughter had been killed by a drunk driver, had died, and she got up and gave this horrible, gut-wrenching, heartbreaking story about her daughter, and the whole point of it was for you legislators to "Go back and make sure that the beer distributors are not held responsible for somebody who is drunk driving."

Then I felt like a complete [prostitute]. I couldn't get up and walk out on these people.

JMc: You didn't report on it, did you?

DR: Oh, heavens no. But that was educational for me. I was like, "Oh, my god."

JMc: Mike, what were you going to say?

MS: That's an example of the camaraderie and things. Dave [Heinemann] put together the Legislative Follies.

DR: Dave Heinemann.

MS: It was very well attended. People would talk about it for days sometimes.

JMc: Dave Heinemann, our videographer, would commemorate every session of the legislature with a coffee mug that members of the media got and the legislators got. It was a very different place in those days. There were partisan differences, but there was a shared mission is the way I put it.

DR: Is it not like that at all anymore?

JMc: It's less like that. The partisan differences have crept into almost everything. It's more performance art sometimes than policy making.

DR: So worse than when Brownback—

JMc: That's when it started to turn, certainly. Maybe even a little bit before that actually. It's just a different place. For better or for worse, we can put labels on it, but it's just different than it was in the heyday because we're all sitting here talking about the good, old days, right?

JM: Well, I notice how quiet it is out there. Even in the summer, the Capitol was a noisy place.

JMc: Yes.

JM: In the seventies, and they had the big counter in the rotunda. That's gone. That was where the action began.

JMc: We could go on for a lot longer. We've already gone on—I've enjoyed every minute of it. I can't tell you how much we at the Kansas Oral History Project appreciate you agreeing to take part in this. This oral history and the stuff that's been compiled with former legislators and cabinet officials, now we're endeavoring to talk to the people who covered it all, the media and the press. This has been a very good kick-off to that conversation. I appreciate it.

MS: Thanks for inviting us.

JM: We were free to libel whoever we wanted to. That's a good thing.

JMc: Thanks, guys.

JM: Thank you.

[End of File]

