

[This interview is one of ten oral history interviews of Kansas legislators in 2015 done by Dr. Burdett Loomis under the auspices of the University of Kansas and the Shawnee County Historical Society with funding from the Kansas Humanities Council. This set of interviews became the foundation for the Kansas Oral History Project with its incorporation.]

LOOMIS: So, it's the 26th of February in Wichita, with former Senator Mike Johnston. Thank you again for agreeing to do this.

JOHNSTON: Sure, happy to do it.

LOOMIS: So, we're really talking about careers in the state legislature, although you've been around Kansas government beyond the legislature, so we certainly want to take a look at how you see the legislature from your years with the Turnpike Authority and others.

Well, let's start by just talking about how you got involved in running for office in the first place. How did you come to run for office in the first place?

JOHNSTON: Well, I was—in the late '60s, I was a student at Pittsburg State University. I had gone to community college for five semesters after I got out of the Army and Army Reserves in December of 1964. Went to community college and then took a job at the ammunition plant at Parsons, which had opened in late '66 as a result of the Vietnam War. I dropped out of school a couple of years and finally decided that I didn't want to drive railroad spikes for the rest of my life or something like that and decided to go back to school, so went back to Pittsburg part time one year, and then the last two years I worked at the ammunition plant at nights—it was a forty-hour job—and went to school in the daytime and drove back and forth to Pittsburg.

Well, during that time, I became acquainted with a guy named Delano Bass, B-a-s-s. Delano lived in Parsons. His daughter—I was acquainted with his daughter, who dated a friend of mine. And Delano was in the labor movement and was [Robert B.] "Bob" Docking's first labor commissioner. So, I got acquainted with him just socially, and he encouraged me to get involved in Democrat politics, and he was a very partisan, intense guy but became a bit of a mentor to me.

Then in the late '60s, early '70s, you know, Vietnam was winding down. The plant—rumors that it was going to close. And in '71 he was still in Topeka, working in the Docking administration, and I was working at the ammunitions plant, in the safety department. I was a safety engineer. So, I don't remember whether he contacted me or I contacted him, but the job as the state's industrial safety director was open. A guy had retired who'd been in that job, and he called me and asked me if I was interested in taking a look at it. And long story short, I ended up taking the job and moving to Topeka in early August of 1971. At that time, he was not the labor commissioner anymore; he'd moved on to another job in the administration.

And, you know, little by little, in the early '70s, —the Senate seat in Parsons was occupied by a guy named Hudson, Cale Hudson, who lived in Chanute, and he—

LOOMIS: How do you spell the first name?

JOHNSTON: C-a-l-e.

JOHNSTON: And he had beaten the Democrat incumbent in 1972 by 120 votes. Well, one thing led to another, and I really don't remember the exact genesis of thinking about running for that seat, but it was held by a Republican who beat the Democrat who lived in Parsons. And during that time, you know, I was a patronage employee. And I remember Delano talking about going to events and buying tickets as kind of paying—it's your union dues. I mean, that's kind of the way he looked at it. So, I became interested and talked about, you know, maybe I ought to move home and run for that seat. But [James A.] "Jim" McCain's name came up, who retired in '74 as the president of Kansas State. [Robert F.] "Bob" Bennett was governor, and I don't remember all the details, but McCain agreed to take the job as the labor commissioner for about a year, leaving—from '75 to '76, kind of mid-year to mid-year. And as a result, I became very well acquainted with him. I reported to him. And at one point—and I told him I was thinking about leaving and moving home, but at one point there was a job opened up, and I said, "You know, I might consider staying if I get that job." And he laughed and said, "Well, you better think about continuing what you're doing, you know, because I'm not gonna give you that job," in so many words. But I had a very warm relationship with him, and in June of '76 I resigned and came home and filed. At that time, the filing deadline was the 20th of June, as I recall.

JOHNSTON: And won. Won by about 2,500 votes. You know, I had won because I worked hard, and the other guy didn't work very hard.

LOOMIS: - Did you run against the incumbent?

JOHNSTON: I ran against the incumbent, right, a one-term incumbent. And I'm not sure even if he'd had worked hard that he could have beat me. The demographics of being in Parsons—being in Labette County, was very important. But I worked hard, and, like, Wilson County was in my district, '72—the Democrat who lost carried 31 percent of the vote in Wilson County, so I worked hard in Wilson County and carried about 43 percent. So, when I saw those numbers election night, I knew I'd won. So that's kind of—it was really kind of a lark. No history of politics in my family. I had a distant uncle who was the Democratic chairman of the county committee back in the '60s, but no family—

LOOMIS: How did you put a campaign together that first time?

JOHNSTON: Oh, you know, I had a few people that had run campaigns. I mean, it was—like, I spent about \$10,000. Nothing really magic about it. Just kind of the plain vanilla stuff you do. You pass out cards—you make cards, pass out cards, —

JOHNSTON: There was no big mailings at that time. That was not done as it's done today, with these big slick mailers that are expensive. And, you know, ran a few ads in the paper, on radio, and, you know, pretty plain vanilla stuff.

LOOMIS: Would you have said that even though the Republican did win by 120 votes previously, that in that part of Kansas, that that would have been considered a Democratic district?

JOHNSTON: - I think so at that time.

LOOMIS: No primary opposition?

JOHNSTON: No primary opposition, no. Well, let me go back. There was a guy named David Miller had the seat, the House seat back in the early '70s. At one point, he talked about resigning. Ultimately, he didn't resign. And I had it worked out to talk to the county chairman at that time, a guy named Sid [unintelligible; 7:57], a farmer, and I had it worked it out that Sid would support me to take David's place if he resigned. Well, as it turned out, he didn't resign, and that would have been probably in '75, something like that, and then in '76 I ended up, you know, going home and filing. And winning.

LOOMIS: - Had you been around the leg— even though you'd been in Topeka—

JOHNSTON: Not really very much at all, no. No, not much at all. I had very little contact. Some, but really not much at all.

LOOMIS: So, you came in the spring of—or January of 1977? Is that when you—

JOHNSTON: Yeah. [James Earl] "Jimmy" Carter and I took office at the same time.

LOOMIS: - So how did you, you know, in essence, find your way? How did you address the issue of becoming a senator and trying to be an effective one, I assume?

JOHNSTON: Well, you know, you have to remember, this was kind of in the wake of Watergate.

In '76, Carter was elected. So, it was, you know, a high-water mark for Democrats—nationally and locally. We picked up five seats—

LOOMIS: Oh, is that right?

JOHNSTON: —in the Senate. Went from 14 to 19, net gain of five.

LOOMIS: And the House didn't. It was 63-62.

JOHNSTON: Right, and [John W.] Carlin was elected speaker. So, you know, [Donald L.] "Don" Allegrucci, recently deceased Supreme Court Justice, was in my class, and he was my office mate for the first four years. We shared a little tiny office together. The guy from Lawrence at that time, a guy named [Sen.] Arnold Berman, was a very smart, very smart little

guy. Very destructive personality. But a very smart little guy. You know, he taught me a lesson that has served me well throughout my career, because if you recall, Arnold served one term.

LOOMIS: - That's when—when I moved to Kansas.

JOHNSTON: Jane Eldridge beat him in 1980, and Arnold, I used to tell people, never saw a bridge he didn't burn. And those bridges turned around and got him. I mean, Arnold went out of his way to antagonize people. He didn't have to, and so it taught me the lesson, you know, if you don't have to burn any bridges, go out of your way not to.

JOHNSTON: If you're an elected official, you have to burn a bridge now and then, by definition. You just have to. But don't go out of your way to seek enemies. You know, those you vanquish—you know, don't antagonize them. Treat them with even more respect.

JOHNSTON: I tried to that in my life, and frankly that's been one of the things that's served me best, is I was pretty successful at developing relationships with people and building trust, and it served me very well through the years.

LOOMIS: Sure, and that's a big part of being in the legislature. So, when you got there, who was the minority leader?

JOHNSTON: Jack Steineger.

JOHNSTON: Recently died, not long ago.

LOOMIS: Right. So, had you known him at all beforehand?

JOHNSTON: No, no.

LOOMIS: So how did you—and Jack Steineger, for want of a better term, was an interesting guy.

JOHNSTON: Oh, he was a very interesting guy.

LOOMIS: How did you build a relationship with Sen. Steineger?

JOHNSTON: Well, let me tell you—this is kind of an aside. I didn't know Steineger. I probably met him during the campaign a time or two. I don't remember spending any time with him. His aide at that time was a guy named [Robert] "Bob" Kennedy, and I had some contact with Kennedy through the campaign. But I don't remember much contact, if any, with Jack.

But the day after I was elected, the first phone call the next morning was from Frank Gaines, and I knew Frank very casually, because I was in Topeka and Frank was in the Senate, and I would—you know, I'm sure I met him a time or two or would see him at a social event or some such

thing, but not really well acquainted. Well, he called me the day after the election, and the purpose of his call was to solicit my vote against “that sorry son of a bitch, Jack Steineger.”

JOHNSTON: And when Gaines talked about people he didn’t like, he referred them as “sorry sons of bitches.” That was Frank. And so, I said, “Well, Frank,”—and there was a guy that was running against him by the name of Bert Chaney, running against Steineger, Bert Chaney from Hutchinson.

LOOMIS: Is that Bert with an “e” or “u”? Do you remember?

JOHNSTON: B-e-r-t. C-h-e-n-e-y. [Editor’s note: It is Chaney, Bert Jr.]

JOHNSTON: And, you know, Gaines encouraged me to vote for Chaney, that Steineger was a “sorry son of a bitch.” And as it turns out—and I don’t remember having much contact with Chaney because of him trying to sell, you know, his candidacy to me—but I do recall when we caucused, I said, “You know, we don’t have to have a”—and I’d made up my mind to vote for Steineger. I said, “I don’t have any problem just to have a show of hands.” Somebody said, “We need to have a secret ballot.” I said, “I don’t need a secret ballot. I don’t mind looking Bert in the eye and voting for the other guy.”

JOHNSTON: Well, as it turned out, they had a secret ballot, and Steineger prevailed by a narrow margin, so I wasn’t particularly close to Steineger, and really today can’t tell you, you know, what persuaded me to vote for him over Chaney. But I did. Then four years later, 1980, I decided to run against him.

JOHNSTON: Steineger.

LOOMIS: Yeah.

JOHNSTON: And Chaney was the deciding vote against—and I lost by one vote.

LOOMIS: I’ll be darned.

JOHNSTON: And Chaney—in his own way, Chaney was an interesting guy. Not a very friendly guy and not a very warm guy, but I remember after the vote, he came in the bathroom and was just whistling, just as happy as a lark—you know, the way he sent me a message.

JOHNSTON: And I wasn’t very happy about it, but that’s just the way it was.

LOOMIS: - So why did you decide to run?

JOHNSTON: You know, early on, if you’re in the minority party, the only job there is that is of any significance in the power structure is the [Minority] Leader. [You have] eight committee chairmanships, being the Assistant [Minority] Leader or [Minority] Whip or whatever it really is. It’s just a name on your stationery. But, unlike the majority party, where you chair committees

and you're part of the leadership structure, the Majority Leader, the OCR [Organization, Calendar and Rules] Committee, on the Democratic side, the minority, there's only one job that puts you in—you know, in the structure. And so, you know, as a result, I told Steineger, "I don't have anything against you, Jack. I'm not mad at you. But, you know, you got the only job that is of any real interest."

So then in 1984, I didn't really have the stomach—I wasn't aching to do that again, and I called Steineger up. Nancy Bogina was Steineger's Executive Assistant. And Nancy and I, both before then and since, are very close. We developed a very close personal relationship. I had great respect for Nancy. And I learned this later. I called Jack and said, "Jack, you know, I don't want to run against you again necessarily, but I want to have a more prominent role." I said, "I think I've earned that." You know, ranking members of Ways and Means [Committee] or [unintelligible; 17:14] Ways and Means. "Something other than just a rank-and-file member." And Steineger listened, was polite and said, "I'll get back to you." Well, I never heard from him. He never called me back. And I later learned from Nancy that phone call—he was on a speaker phone, and Nancy and at that time his aide was a guy named Richard Larimore, who lived in Lawrence, —

JOHNSTON: He's since deceased. He had ALS [amyotrophic lateral sclerosis].

LOOMIS: - I didn't know that about Richard.

JOHNSTON: Yeah, he was—for a period of time, was Steineger's chief aide. And I learned later from Nancy, after Steineger hung up, Larimore said, "Jack, you don't have to do shit for him. He can't do anything to you. You don't have to accommodate him at all." So, Jack never called me back. He didn't call me back, so I called him. I said, "I'm gonna run against you again."

And, like the experience of the first race, it gave me the basis to make certain that I—you know, running these leadership races are different than anything else. You know, you're dealing with peers. And oftentimes—you know, some people aren't very good at saying no.

JOHNSTON: You know, the legislature is a microcosm of society, and you have some really strong, smart people, and you've got some really weak, not-so-bright people. But they all have the same—their vote—they all count the same. One vote. So, I was—you know, I already had a cadre of people who had voted for me before. Some were still there. And I made certain that I lined up the votes. As a matter of fact, the night before the caucus, we had a meeting, a social event, and all—I had nine votes. Sixteen people, so I needed nine to win. All nine of those people I had together at the same time. Because one of the problems you have is people wondering, "I heard you're gonna do this."

JOHNSTON: You know, "Steineger said you're voting for him." Well, I made certain that all nine of us got together and could see, you know, we were all together; it wasn't a matter of hearing about what you're going to do from somebody else. Steineger, with all the little tricks, where you float things, rumors that aren't true about "So-and-so is going actually vote for me"

and “Johnson thinks he has your vote.” And that unnerves a few people because they want to be on the winning side. So, I had all of us together. All nine of us were together the night before the vote, so, you know, end of the game.

JOHNSTON: So, I didn’t make the couple of little mistakes I made four years earlier, and the next day, you know, I prevailed, as I knew I would, and it was never acrimonious at all between Steineger—in fact, after the vote, later that day we met at the hotel I think for something. I don’t remember what. He had a couple of minor requests or something, and he thanked me for not being malicious or vicious. You know, very professional. Not personal at all.

JOHNSTON: I held no animus to him, and I don’t think he held any against me.

LOOMIS: And then, just to round this whole minority leader stuff out, then in ’88 you ran and won again, and you were minority leader for another four years.

JOHNSTON: Two years.

LOOMIS: Two years.

JOHNSTON: Two years, because I left the Senate in 1991. I resigned the first day of the ’91 session.

JOHNSTON: Which was a cabinet secretary—

LOOMIS: That’s right, exactly.

JOHNSTON: —in Joan’s [Joan Finney’s] first year.

JOHNSTON: So, I was the leader for six years, —

LOOMIS: Six years.

JOHNSTON: —’85 through ’91.

LOOMIS: To go back into that first term, what kind of committee assignments did you get?

JOHNSTON: I was on the Tax Committee, I was on the Transportation Committee, I think the Elections Committee, on Public Health and Welfare, which I came to loath. I think those were the committees I was on.

LOOMIS: Why did you come to loath—

JOHNSTON: Oh, the Public Health and Welfare Committee—Bill Morris, God rest his soul, was a senator from Wichita, and he and I—he and I set together, and all you do is referee professional disputes—people in the medical profession, whether it’s doctors and osteopaths and

chiropractors or nurses, nurse practitioners or—you know, everybody wants some piece of everybody else's turf. It's all about money. At the end of the day, it's all about money. Never about competence or what people could do. It's all about money. And I just got sick of that. In fact, Morris and I would laugh about, "God, we gotta get off this committee!" When I was elected leader, I remember telling Morris, "You know, I can get off that committee now."

JOHNSTON: So, I had good committee assignments. I was not on Ways and Means in either of my first two terms.

LOOMIS: This sounds like kind of a stupid question, but how did you learn to be a senator? I mean, you'd never been in politics before. You know, you said you had a bad role model in Arnold Berman. Who were some of the good role models that you learned from?

JOHNSTON: I'm not sure I'd say Arnold was a poor role model.

LOOMIS: Well, I mean, in effect—

JOHNSTON: You know, Arnold showed you what you shouldn't do if you want to stay around and have a chance to stay around.

JOHNSTON: Oh, in the early years, I kind of admired Norman [E.] Gaar. He was very smart. And I admired his intellect. He was really good with the rules. I mean, most of the senators are not very good at understanding rules. I came to be—I think when I left, the best parliamentarian in the Senate. I took time and spend some time to try to learn the rules, and I think that many of the members came to respect that element about me. I respected that about Gaar.

JOHNSTON: But how do you become—you know, I've got a pretty simple philosophy. I'm not sure it's one that I articulated on purpose, in the same way that: "Here's what I want to do." But, you know, I have been pretty successful at building relationships and doing it just by what comes naturally: Be honest with people. Be a truth teller. Telling the truth all the time is not easy. That's why a lot of people don't tell the truth all the time, is because to tell the truth all the time, like I think I do and have, is difficult. It's much easier sometimes to shade the truth, because you avoid conflict and controversy.

JOHNSTON: But I've had a lot of luck in my professional life just treating people like you want to be treated, trying to treat them with respect, being honest and forthright. Whether—that's how you be a senator, that's how you—I mean, that's just how you live.

LOOMIS: I mean, it strikes me that the Kansas House, with 125 people—it's hard to build as many personal relationships that are strong, but the Senate seems like ideally suited to that kind of building relationships.

JOHNSTON: I'm not sure—I'm not sure I would agree with that. I think that whether it's a group of forty or 125—and not everybody would say, "Gee, Mike Johnston was the greatest speaker in the world."

But I don't think you could find anybody I ever served with who said I was dishonest or that my word was not good. I don't think you could find a soul that would say that. Because my word was good.

JOHNSTON: And you develop that reputation. But not everybody's word was good. You know, the weakest people are often the ones who, on close issues, provide the difference because—

LOOMIS: - Well, that's a nice point.

JOHNSTON: It's very odd, but the weakest—the Jerry Morans of the world, who hide from making tough decisions, oftentimes are the ones who prevail or provide the margin of those decisions, so it's just an odd inversion of the process.

JOHNSTON: You know, when you got a real tough issue—and, you know, I'm sure the lobbyists would say, "Well, Johnston said he's X. Mark him off." It won't do you any good to go back to try and talk him out of his position.

JOHNSTON: There's lots of people like that. I'm not one of them.

LOOMIS: Yeah. No, no, exactly.

JOHNSTON: But the Morans of the world stay [on the list]. Because he had a reputation: "You can flip him. You can flip him."

JOHNSTON: But there's a large number of people where, you know, there are competing forces. Once they know what you're going to do, you don't ever hear from them again. They spend their time on the weak in the plot.

LOOMIS: You came in in '76, at the end of Bob Bennett's four years.

JOHNSTON: In the middle of his term.

LOOMIS: Right, but the last two years of his term.

JOHNSTON: Right.

LOOMIS: When you were a first-term senator, did you work with Bennett at all?

JOHNSTON: I had some contact with him from time to time. You know, I wouldn't say I worked with him on a regular basis on an interpersonal sort of thing. But I found Bennett very professional. You know, he had a reputation for being this brilliant guy—and kind of an arrogant

guy, kind of condescending. And I think all of that was probably true. But he always treated me with respect. I mean, I never got the sense that he viewed me as being right at the end of his nose—at the end of the slope of his nose. I never got that sense with him. And I tried to treat him the same way.

LOOMIS: Sure. How did your relationship—what kind of relationship did you have with the governor of your own party once—

JOHNSTON: Carlin?

LOOMIS: —Carlin came in?

JOHNSTON: Carlin and I developed a very—you know, you can't use the word "warm" in the same breath as "Carlin" because—you know, John is not and never was a warm sort of a guy. But he and I had—I think shared—we were, you know, kind of moderate, pragmatic people. That's kind of how we viewed the world. We need to find a way forward, and you do that through compromise. And I think Carlin was very much that way, and I was very much that way, so we—yeah, we built a good relationship through the years.

LOOMIS: - What were the years that [Ross O.] Doyen was the president of the Senate?

JOHNSTON: He was Senate president when I was elected, and he was ousted in '84, when I was elected leader, in the '85 session. [Robert] "Bob" Talkington beat him. Because during that time—and Fred Kerr beat Norman Gaar for majority leader, all at the same time, so during that fall campaign, between the election and the caucus, Fred and "Talk" and I talked frequently.

LOOMIS: Oh, really?

JOHNSTON: Yeah, frequently. You know, they were trying to beat incumbents in those jobs. I was trying to beat an incumbent. So, yeah, we talked all the time. Fred Kerr, I would tell you, probably—Fred Kerr probably was my closest friend from the Senate. And his brother David and I—although David got very angry at me because of the elections in '88, he warmed back up, and he remains a very close friend today. In fact, I texted him the day before yesterday about his Senator, the [constitutional carry?] guy, and I said, "I'll bet you're proud of him." He texted me back. He said, "It's the stupidest, dumbest thing I've heard of." You know, "I need to say that." But Fred was probably my closest friend that I developed. Bud Burke was very close friend, too, so those two, maybe.

LOOMIS: Yeah. And so, we'll say a leadership team like Talkington and Kerr—you could work with them—

JOHNSTON: Sure.

LOOMIS: —pretty easily.

JOHNSTON: Yeah. I mean, there are limitations because of their caucus. But, you know, the divide wasn't like it is today.

JOHNSTON: I mean, there was very few ideologues of either party in those years. Now, it may be that we were soft and didn't believe in anything. You know, everybody's got their own take about that.

JOHNSTON: But it was just a very different atmosphere. When Ben Vidrickson—well, he was appointed to start with—in '78, to take the seat that John Simpson had vacated when Simpson ran in that primary for United States Senate, —and then he resigned and moved to Kansas City.

JOHNSTON: The word that we had reputationally was that “this Vidrickson guy is Attila the Hun.” You know, so far right.

JOHNSTON: Well, as it turns out today, Ben would be so far left,

JOHNSTON: Would be so far left in the Republican Party, he couldn't get elected anything, anything. And I developed a very warm friendship and relationship with Ben. Now, he served as transportation secretary, was on the board of the Turnpike [Authority] for a number of years.

JOHNSTON: Matter of fact, you know, when I was hired, there was—the House Transportation chair at that time was a guy named Rex Crowell.

JOHNSTON: From Longton. Well, Rex was on Turnpike board, and Rex decided that he wanted the Turnpike job, and he came to me, and I remember saying Bill Graves was running for Governor. He said, “I'll tell you what.” He said, “If Graves wins, I get the job. If Slattery wins, you get the job.” And this was early in '94.

LOOMIS: '94, right.

JOHNSTON: Early in '94. This happened at a hotel in Washington. We were there for a meeting. And I just said, “Rex, you're not gonna get that job, period.” I said, “If I have to resign as Secretary and have Joan [Finney] appoint somebody to take my”—I couldn't vote on my contract ratification with Turnpike, but I said, “If I have to resign and have Joan appoint somebody to take my place to vote to be the third vote, I'll do that.”

JOHNSTON: Well, as it turned out, Ben Vidrickson was the third vote. Rex was trying to get Ben to vote for him, and Ben voted for me. I don't know if you knew Rex.

LOOMIS: Yeah, I knew—no, I knew Rex—

JOHNSTON: You know, Rex would be a disaster, just a disaster.

LOOMIS: We'll stipulate that, yeah, yeah.

JOHNSTON: And everybody knew it. So, Ben voted to ratify my contract with the Turnpike.

JOHNSTON: But when he came to the Senate, he was—you know, his reputation was he was just way off the right side of the ship. As it turned out, he was a pretty moderate guy.

LOOMIS: You mentioned both Norman Gaar and Jack Steineger before. As time went on, Sen. Gaar became somewhat alienated from certainly the leadership in the Senate, and often would hook up with Jack Steineger to do one thing or another.

JOHNSTON: Of course, he hooked up with Steineger, you know, when they both were in leadership positions.

JOHNSTON: So, he continued that. And Doyen tried to partner with Democrats with things after he was ousted, too.

JOHNSTON: But he was always with Ross and Norman about grinding an ax.

JOHNSTON: They were over, wanting me to help do something or other, offering to help me do something. It wasn't because they wanted to help me do something.

JOHNSTON: You know, they had some other motive of their own.

LOOMIS: One of my great regrets in this project is that Ross Doyen did die fairly recently.

JOHNSTON: He did die. He died, and there were two members of the Senate that served with him who were at his funeral.

LOOMIS: Is that right?

JOHNSTON: Me and Eric Yost.

LOOMIS: Is that right? Which is an interesting pairing, in itself.

JOHNSTON: I saw Eric at Bob Talkington's funeral, at Norma Daniels' funeral, and when Ross died, I called him and I said, "Are you going to go to the funeral?" "Yeah." I said, "Well, you're welcome to ride with me or whatever you want to do." So, I rode up to Concordia with him.

JOHNSTON: And he said that he tries to go to the funeral of any member of the Senate that he ever served with. I said, "You know, I try to do the same thing." Ross and I weren't close friends at all, but—

LOOMIS: You got someone who's been, you know, the president of the Senate—

JOHNSTON: Now, Ross was one of the best infighters. I mean, he was really a good political infighter.

LOOMIS: Do you have an example of that that you can remember off the top of your head?

JOHNSTON: Oh, I really don't, except to say, you know, just down in the trenches, trying to scratch votes and trying to figure out some way to maneuver somebody to vote. You know, all the angles. You know, he was just good at that. And that works, but only, again, this what I call the kind of weak folks, where you can maneuver them and push them and intimidate them a little bit. You know, they're just susceptible to those tactics. And not everybody is.

JOHNSTON: But Ross was really good about knowing who you could move and how you move them and so forth. He was really good at that.

LOOMIS: I don't want this to be too leading, but I saw Ross in the late '80s, early '90s, and he was still in the Senate, of course, —a long career. It struck me by then he was kind of isolated.

JOHNSTON: Well, he became more and more isolated as time went on, in part because, you know, he didn't just retreat back into the trenches and become kind of a rank and file, like—you know, he started trying to form alliances, but to grind axes. And all that does over time is just further isolate you. I think that's a very good observation.

LOOMIS: Do you think that sometimes—and I go back to Doyen, because not too many people do stay too long, but can you stay too long?

JOHNSTON: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. As a matter of fact, I've often said that I stayed too long.

And I didn't realize it till after I was gone, that I was not—I didn't have the same passion that I'd had a few years earlier. And so, you know, when I left after 14 years, that was plenty, as I look back on it. That was a good time to leave.

JOHNSTON: But I was lucky enough. I walked out of one door into another nice door, on my own terms. You know, I wasn't vanquished. The voters didn't throw me out and didn't have to go through that. I didn't have an opponent in 1988.

LOOMIS: I was going ask you: Did you—so you came in in '76. In '80 and '94, did you have opponents?

JOHNSTON: I had an opponent in the '80, a guy from Parsons, a lawyer, and by that time Coffeyville was into my district, by reapportionment. Wilson County was gone. So, it was a different—

JOHNSTON: I won I think by a couple of thousand votes. In '84, I had a guy—I don't even remember his name—never met him, never saw him—

LOOMIS: No kidding.

JOHNSTON: He had been a fighter pilot or something, and he had a few ads, little, tiny ads, but I never saw the guy. Never met him, never saw him. So, he was not a credible candidate.

JOHNSTON: In '88 they didn't file—imagine not filing a candidate against the leader?

LOOMIS: - In '88, then, were you able to go—did you campaign for other people?

JOHNSTON: I did. I campaigned for a lot of them. But one of the bad things about not having an opponent: it's hard to raise money.

JOHNSTON: At that time, we weren't as focused on money. Today the leaders don't have any problem going to lobbyists and [saying], "Give me money because I'll give it to somebody else."

JOHNSTON: But back then, money was just not quite as prominent as it is today.

LOOMIS: Did you recruit candidates—

JOHNSTON: Yeah.

LOOMIS: —in '88?

JOHNSTON: -. Yeah, I recruited one against David Kerr. Her name was Frances Garcia. She was on the City Commission in Hutchinson.

JOHNSTON: And then she ran an ad—David Kerr had voted in a committee that I was on to put the community colleges under the Board of Regents. It was not a recorded vote.

JOHNSTON: But I was there. Saw it. And so, Frances ran some ads about David Kerr wants to put the community colleges under the Board of Regents. He ended up beating her handily, but oh, he was furious. He knew how she got that information.

JOHNSTON: He never denied it, but he was just furious that I would snatch something out that, you know, was kind of done back in the weeds, and he was very hostile to me for the better part of the '89 session. I remember when his brother would say, "You need to talk to your brother."

JOHNSTON: "I mean, you know, he needs to get over this shit."

JOHNSTON: And ultimately did, and David and I are really close friends today.

LOOMIS: -. And I think you need to have—sometimes you need to have a short memory.

JOHNSTON: David doesn't have a short memory. He pouts, and that's just part of his personality. It takes him a while to kind of get over things.

LOOMIS: Tell me a little bit about working first with Talkington and then with Bud Burke in '88, '89 and '90. How did you guys—you had pretty close Senates in both of those times. The second one was very close.

JOHNSTON: In terms of the splits? It was—

LOOMIS: It was 22-18.

JOHNSTON: 22-18, yeah.

JOHNSTON: You know, I liked Talkington on a personal level. I like Burke on a personal level. Get along fine with them. In terms of working with them, really not a lot of difference. They were both pretty pragmatic—moderate, pragmatic guys like I was, so, I mean, it wasn't much intrigue about it at all.

LOOMIS: Aside from the House in those days, the other party, of course, was [John Michael] "Mike" Hayden. How do you think that, in the end, Mike Hayden—how did you get along with Mike?

JOHNSTON: I got along with Mike very well. when he was elected governor, I called him the next day, and he took my call, and I said, "You know, Mike, I want to congratulate you because I'm really happy for you and Patty on a personal level." I said, "I know how hard you worked, and I know this is a real achievement that you and Patty share." And I said, "I'm happy for you on a personal level." I said, "On a political level," I said, "I'll fight you when I must, and I'll support you when I can." And he used that in his inaugural address, paraphrased it in his inaugural address.

LOOMIS: In the end, how do you think Mike's going to be regarded as a governor?

JOHNSTON: I think history is likely not to treat him fairly. I thought he was a poor governor, but I thought, at the same time, that he didn't and hasn't gotten credit he deserved for the passage of the Comprehensive Highway Program in '89.

JOHNSTON: I mean, that was largely the result of his leadership. It would not have happened without his leadership, and I don't think he's been given enough credit for that. But I thought Mike—his personal style just was not very conducive to—you know, he quarreled with the Kerry Patricks of the world, publicly quarreled which raised them up to a level that they didn't deserve, and he did it frequently.

LOOMIS: Yeah. -, there was a contentiousness you don't see in him when you talk to him personally.

JOHNSTON: Yeah, and, you know, in politics, then as now but probably worse now, the notion of truth telling always comes up in campaigns, and I don't remember the issue, but Mike represented something that simply was not true. I knew it wasn't true. I wrote him a letter, and I

publicly called him out, and I wrote him a letter. I said, “You know, if you want to stand on the steps of the Capitol and call me a son of a bitch, be my guest, but what you’re saying you know is not true.”

JOHNSTON: And he never answered the letter, never brought it up to me. But we were always cordial, and, you know, Frank Gaines died two years ago Christmas, and Mike and Frank Gaines were very close friends.

JOHNSTON: And I didn’t know it until Beverly, his wife, asked me to provide a eulogy for Frank at his funeral. And I didn’t know that Mike Hayden had been asked to do the same thing, because I hadn’t seen him in several years. And so, he and I delivered the eulogies for Frank at his funeral. And Frank's friends, you know, packed house at this funeral. I don’t know how many people were there. Several hundred.

JOHNSTON: But Mike was—you know, because I hadn’t seen him in quite a while. We exchanged pleasantries. I haven’t seen him since.

JOHNSTON: Now, we weren’t close friends, but we were associates and acquaintances and colleagues of sorts.

LOOMIS: Sure. And probably, looking back, you had more in common—you go to the legislature today, and the differences are so

JOHNSTON: So stark.

LOOMIS: —vast. I’ve often heard that Hayden was a terrific Ways and Means chair, a pretty good speaker and probably less good as governor.

JOHNSTON: That’s probably fair. Yeah, that’s probably fair. I mean, I wasn’t in the House—

LOOMIS: Right. No, I know. I understand that.

JOHNSTON: —so I didn’t serve with him on an everyday basis. But he had a good reputation when he was Ways and Means chair. When he left, Bill Bunten chaired Ways and Means.

JOHNSTON: But that’s probably fair, that with each step he was probably a little less successful.

LOOMIS: Over your six years as a leader, what were your relations with the leaders in the House?

JOHNSTON: You know, [James D.] “Jim” Braden was speaker for a time. I had a very good relationship with Jim. Marvin Barkis was minority leader.

JOHNSTON: You know, Marvin was Marvin. I had a good, warm relationship with him. We're not close friends. It was not really close on a personal level. I was probably closer to Braden, in some ways.

JOHNSTON: I'm trying to think who else. The majority leaders in the House during those years. I don't remember who they were.

LOOMIS: Yeah, I'm not—

JOHNSTON: But I didn't have—would not have had much to do with them. So, it was really the speaker and the minority leader who were on the [State] Finance Council and the—

LOOMIS: LCC [Legislative Coordinating Council]

JOHNSTON: —LCC and so forth, so you had some contact with him on a more regular basis.

LOOMIS: Did you have fun being a legislator?

JOHNSTON: Yeah, I did, for the most part, for the most part. The thing that I missed most is, you know, the legislature—we have peers. It creates an atmosphere where people can really exchange, honestly exchange competing points of view without very much worry about being penalized because of what you said. I really like debating people and challenging people and being challenged. I like that a lot. As a matter of fact, it's interesting—I don't remember the guy's last name, but a long time—whatever they're called, doormen in the Senate—died in December, Joe— [Transcriber's note: Joe Hafner.]

LOOMIS: Yeah, I don't know.

JOHNSTON: Well, when I got there last year with the League, there he is. And I was there—he was there during part of the time I was there. And, you know, those guys that set there every day and listen to people—they develop pretty credible opinions about people, about senators. Because they see them all the time. They hear them all the time. Well, Joe really liked me, for whatever reason. He'd tell me, "God, you got that son of a bitch today."

JOHNSTON: And last year, when I saw him—went up to him and shook hands and hugged him, and he said (paraphrasing), "Ah, they don't have people like you around here anymore," which I took as a real compliment.

LOOMIS: Right. As you should.

JOHNSTON: Yeah, he said, "Some of these"—I can't remember. It was really kind of funny. "Some of these are just wackier than shit." -

JOHNSTON: I didn't know until last year—Jim Maag and I were up talking to him. He was a tank commander in the European theater during World War II.

LOOMIS: No kidding!

JOHNSTON: He was in the Battle of the Bulge.

LOOMIS: Wow!

JOHNSTON: And he talked freely about it. I mean, a lot of those guys won't talk about that stuff; they just—

JOHNSTON: But he talked very freely about it. It was fascinating listening to all those war stories.

LOOMIS: Yeah, you get—those guys—you know, basically they're pretty quiet, and they sit there all the time, and that's fascinating. You know, they're real people, of course, you know. And interesting that they stay pretty late into their lives.

JOHNSTON: Well, he was ninety-one or ninety-two.

LOOMIS: Is that right? Is that right?

JOHNSTON: Yeah. He'd go to the—one of the fraternal clubs. I don't remember—the Moose or something, on Saturday night and dance, dance with the old ladies. Yeah, he had quite—I don't remember what he died of, but it was very sudden and unexpected.

JOHNSTON: I was getting ready to start another year.

LOOMIS: So, you're senator for sixteen years. Time consuming. How did you support yourself, you know, when you were out of session those years?

JOHNSTON: Well, I was single. I didn't get married until I was forty-two in 1987, so when I was elected, I sold a little—first elected, sold a little life insurance, lived in a little apartment, so I didn't have a lot of needs. And then when I was elected leader, the leader's pay was—I think it was six or seven, eight hundred dollars a month or something, so it provided—and I started a mortgage company in the early '80s in Parsons. By the mid '80s, I wasn't making a lot of money, but I was making a living. I had a couple of gals that worked for me and gave me the freedom to—and I didn't have a lot of—you know, I'm still single. So, from that standpoint, you patch things together to—

LOOMIS: - But, I mean, very different from having a couple of kids in college, stuff like that.

JOHNSTON: Oh, yeah, yeah, sure, sure. Yeah, very different deal.

JOHNSTON: I've often said the best thing that ever happened to me, for a variety of reasons, is losing—when Carlin and I lost to Joan in 1990.

LOOMIS: You were the lieutenant governor candidate.

JOHNSTON: Yes, yes.

JOHNSTON: Yes. In fact, it was—you know, Carlin—he was married to Diane at the time.

JOHNSTON: They lived out back up on the top of the—I call the rabbit hutches there at 29th and Gage, those apartments that set up the hill.

JOHNSTON: And Carlin invited me to join the ticket. I really wasn't very—I didn't want to. You know, I thought about running, myself.

JOHNSTON: If I'd have run myself, I would have been elected, because I'd beaten Joan in the primary, and anybody could have beaten Hayden.

LOOMIS: - If Joan could beat her, —yeah.

JOHNSTON: I'd have beat Joan. And, you know, John—I'll never forget Harrison Hickman, who's I think still a pretty prominent pollster, was our pollster. And he did one poll. And when he came to Kansas to share it with us, he said to Carlin and me—and there may have been other people there; I don't remember—he said that “you and Hayden have the highest negatives, as a tandem, of any candidates I've ever polled.”

LOOMIS: I think I've heard that story before, yeah.

JOHNSTON: And he said, “You know, Hayden is the only guy you can beat, and you are likely the only person he can beat.”

LOOMIS: Right, as two governors or ex-governors.

JOHNSTON: “You're the only one he can beat, and he's the only one you can beat.”

LOOMIS: Did Carlin do anything in that campaign, that primary?

JOHNSTON: No, he worked—yeah, he worked some. I worked. But he had such terribly high negatives with women over—the wives. You know, trading in the wives while he was governor.

JOHNSTON: Particularly traditional women, family—

JOHNSTON: Hayden just had high—you know, Hayden—people—some people didn't like Hayden for the silly reason he had that twang. They just didn't like the way he talked. Does that mean anything?

JOHNSTON: Not really, but in politics everything means something. So, I've often said that best thing that ever happened is losing that election.

JOHNSTON: Because that opened the door for—and I told—I went to Joan after the election, after the primary. I said, “Joan, you know, you and I aren’t well acquainted. We’ve both been up here on our own tracks.”

JOHNSTON: “It’s been different tracks all these years.”

JOHNSTON: I said, “I know you probably don’t trust me, because I was Carlin’s running mate, but I want you to know I’ll do anything I can to help you beat Mike Hayden because I don’t think he deserves to be reelected.” You know, she thanked me, but, you know, Joan was such an unusual character.

JOHNSTON: And then after the election, I went to her and said, “You know, I’m not going to run again.” At that time, Cindy and I had been married about three years. Our oldest daughter was about six months old. She was born in June of 1990. So, I said, “I’m not going to run again for the Senate. My wife works in Topeka, and I’d be available for some assignment in your administration if it’s the right thing to do.”

JOHNSTON: So, she listened patiently and thanked me. In fact, I told her—I said, “The position I’d most covet is the Department of Commerce secretary’s job.”

JOHNSTON: She said, “That’s already gone. That’s taken.” And I said, “okay.” It turned out that [Lauren Nickel, who later married Dave—Dave, Dave—who’s the guy that went to prison?

LOOMIS: Owens?

JOHNSTON: That's correct.

LOOMIS: Yeah. She promised the job to her.

JOHNSTON: She was a disaster.

LOOMIS: Right, [crosstalk; unintelligible; 58:27], yeah.

JOHNSTON: So, she called me that night. Came home, and she said, “I want to offer you the job as the secretary of Human Resources,” which is where I’d worked when I was the [safety director?]. Had been renamed. I said, “Joan, I don’t want that job. I worked there years ago. I don’t have any desire for that job.” But I said, “I’ll accept it one condition.” “What’s that?” “That you give me an opportunity to move to another cabinet position that I may have more interest in if something opens up.”

JOHNSTON: And she agreed, and I sent her a note, in writing, you know, that “here’s what we’ve agreed to.” I never got it back with her signature, but— I created a record—(which I couldn’t find today).

JOHNSTON: So, I started that job, and it wasn't long—she—Art Griggs was the chief attorney for the Department of Administration at the time. And she had not hired a secretary of administration. Well, maybe she hired somebody—she had a couple of appointments that were bombs that went off real quickly, and that might have been one of them. But it wasn't—at six weeks into the administration, her daughter, Mary [Holladay], —

LOOMIS: Right, her Chief of Staff.

JOHNSTON: —her chief of staff. And there was a gal named Susan Seltsam, who had been Joan's assistant when she [Finney] was Treasurer. Susan took a job. I don't know what title she had, but it was basically those three were the government.

JOHNSTON: And that was kind of the inner circle of Joan. I mean, Mary and I really developed quickly a relationship. I liked her. She liked me. And, you know, we just hit it off very well early on.

JOHNSTON: Well, once, six weeks into her administration, Mary called me. “Can you come over?” “Yeah.” Said, “Mom wants you to take the secretary of administration's job.” And I said, “You know, I'm working on some stuff in the Department of Human Resources.” The guy, Dennis Taylor, had been—

JOHNSTON: And Dennis had an organization chart, if you can believe this—he had about thirty people that reported to him, including a secretary to a subordinate of a subordinate.

JOHNSTON: And so, I said, “All these people who [are on Dennis'] organization chart reporting to me.” I said, “I don't want thirty people reporting to me.”

JOHNSTON: So, I was in the process of reorganizing. And there was a guy that had kind of a mid-level job there, who had been a friend of mine for a long time, a guy named Bob [Molander], and I brought Bob Molander up and put him in the assistant's job. He's a smart enough guy. But there was lots of people in government that never get a chance to provide leadership.

JOHNSTON: I mean, they're just kind of [buried?], and they work their life, and that's it.

JOHNSTON: So, I brought him up and put him in as my assistant. And I told Mary—I said, “Mary, I don't want to leave after two months. I'm trying to—you know, give me three or four months and I'll be happy to do it, but I'm not—not right now.”

JOHNSTON: Well, as it turned out, another month or two goes by. Mary calls me back over, and she said, “You know, Mike,” she said, “I'm getting better and better at working with you.” She says, “I don't think you and Mom would get along very well, on a day-to-day basis.” You know, secretary of administration.

JOHNSTON: This works right in with the governor. You know, you're rubbing butts every day. She said, "I just don't think you and Mom would be compatible working together that closely." And I said, "Well, that's fine." Well, the Secretary of Transportation—the first one that Joan had was a guy named Arland Hicks. Now, Arland Hicks had been a career engineer at KDOT [Kansas Department of Transportation], and his wife, [Jean Hicks, had been a school superintendent, had been dismissed, and she sued the school, alleging gender bias. And Joan somehow—they got—you know, Joan was very much a feminist and thought women had been victimized, if you will. She felt that very strongly. Somehow, she hit it off with Jean Hicks through the years, and Arland wanted to be secretary. That was his lifelong—her husband—his lifelong dream. And Joan reluctantly appointed him secretary.

JOHNSTON: Well, as it turns out, he hadn't been there three weeks and Mary called me over - and she said, "Gotta get that Hicks outta there." There were two or three disaffected employees there that he kind of brought into his inner circle, and they kind of shut the door down in the secretary's office and connived about what they were going to do change things, and Mary's getting all these personnel papers promoting, demoting, dismissing—that had to be approved by the secretary of administration. Mary's getting all these documents over there. She says, "We gotta get rid of that guy. We gotta get him outta there." And so, he didn't serve thirty days.

LOOMIS: No kidding!

JOHNSTON: And there was a guy from the budget division. Gary Stotts is his name.

LOOMIS: Sure, that name's familiar.

JOHNSTON: So, she appointed Gary to take his place, acting secretary.

JOHNSTON: Well, as time was going by—he wasn't going to stay there forever. As time was going by and the secretary of administration deal finally went by the wayside, Mary said, "Would you be interested in taking the transportation part?" "Absolutely! That would be a perfect fit."

JOHNSTON: So that's how that happened. Now, interestingly enough, Joan one time, early in her administration—there's a construction company in Kansas City, Kansas. I can't think of the name of it, but it was owned by this Italian family, and I don't recall their names, either, but there was two or three of them. [Transcriber's note: the company is Amino Brothers Co. Source: <https://local.yahoo.com/info-17917039-amino-brothers-company-kansas-city>,] The person now who runs the company [as a human resources executive] is a relative. Her name is Mary Sullivan. [unintelligible; 65:51] the name. But anyhow, they had an office, and one of the brothers, would cook these Italian meals once a week, so you'd go by—you know, the community [sic; company] is in Wyandotte County, in the basement of this building.

JOHNSTON: Amino Brothers was the name of the company. And one of the brothers was a Vic, [Victor] "Vic" Amino. And I was invited over there for lunch one day, and I may have gone with the governor. I don't remember if I was with her. But when we were walking down the

stairs to the basement, and Vic is ahead of us, and Joan stopped and said to me, “He won the election for me.”

JOHNSTON: Because of what he did in getting out the vote and wound up canvassing for her, is what she was talking about.

JOHNSTON: Well, circle back around to [Senator John Francis (Jack) Steineger, Jr.] Steineger. One of the other things about Joan is that she was super secretive. And early on—at one point, she called me in about something, and she said—I think it was when she was mad at Art Griggs because she thought he was doing something to undermine her. As it turned out, she misunderstood what he was doing. He was right, and she misunderstood, but she was still angry with him when she said, “You know, I just don’t trust anybody. I don’t even trust Spencer.” Her husband.

JOHNSTON: And I said, “Well, Joan, let me tell you something: If you don’t trust me, then you need to get rid of me. If you don’t trust me, if you don’t think you can trust me, then I need to go do something else.”-

JOHNSTON: And she kind of paused, and we went on, but over time, and I think a fairly short period of time, Joan came to trust me. She was super secretive. So, when I agree to take the secretary of transportation—some administrations would float that out there to a few people to see how they liked it. Well, as it turns out, there was no announcement until it was done. Mary knew about it. Susan knew about it. Joan knew about it. Spencer might have known about it. I don’t know. I don’t think anybody else knew about it.

LOOMIS: I’ll be darned.

JOHNSTON: And I’m telling you, keeping a secret is not easy. I can keep secrets. I can do that. -And so, there was no leak. So, I’m announced I got the job. Well, if that had been leaked, well, Jack Steineger would have gone to Vic Amino and said, “You gotta get Joan. She can’t appoint him to that job.”

JOHNSTON: I’m sure that would have happened because that’s right out of the Wyandotte County playbook.

JOHNSTON: Because Jack would have known how much Joan cared about Vic Amino.

JOHNSTON: And he would have been circled around to grind a little bit of ax with me. But there was no leak, no nothin’, so after it’s announced, it’s too late.

LOOMIS: -. That’s fascinating. -. Because you get those leaks, and then [crosstalk; unintelligible; 69:09].

JOHNSTON: A lot of administrations will float—will deliberately leak a guy’s name—

LOOMIS: Oh, absolutely.

JOHNSTON: —to see how it's received. But not Joan.

LOOMIS: So, I don't want to spend too much time—we were going to talk more about the legislature, but to move—so you moved from Transportation directly to the Turnpike?

JOHNSTON: - The last day at KDOT was December 31st, '94; the first date of KTA was January 1, '95.

LOOMIS: So, you never missed a paycheck.

JOHNSTON: Never missed a paycheck.

JOHNSTON: In fact, I signed the contract that I had with the Turnpike. My wife signed it—my wife and I—right after midnight New Year's Eve.

LOOMIS: No kidding.

JOHNSTON: I signed it after I was gone from KDOT.

JOHNSTON: So, I was no longer on the board of the Turnpike, so I couldn't sign the contract while I was a sitting board member.

JOHNSTON: So, I signed it after midnight.

LOOMIS: In terms of jobs, is there a better job than running the Turnpike?

JOHNSTON: I don't think—I'm not sure there is. I'm not sure it's not the best job in the state.

LOOMIS: - What was your relationship with the legislature once you—we talked a little bit before about how they're separate, but did you talk to the legislature at all?

JOHNSTON: Rarely. - And I only went in the Capitol when I had to because I knew then that there was nothing good that could happen to Turnpike in the legislature. Nothing.

JOHNSTON: Either—you put the mindset of some of those folks, what can we do to you or take from you? And neither one of those things—so I had very little contact with the legislature through the years.

LOOMIS: Given that the governor, who was elected in '94 and served for eight years, [William Preston] "Bill" Graves, was a trucker and a transportation guy, did you talk to him at all?

JOHNSTON: You know, from time to time, but not—

LOOMIS: Not on a policy basis.

JOHNSTON: No.

JOHNSTON: When he was elected—of course, I'd already agreed to—

JOHNSTON: But he—you know, maybe—I'm not sure why, just a perfunctory gesture or something, but asked me if I'd stay.

LOOMIS: Oh! [Samuel Dale] "Sam" Brownback asked [Deborah] "Deb" Miller to stay [as secretary of transportation].

JOHNSTON: - Well, I think he asked her to stay because he didn't have anybody else.

JOHNSTON: There were a couple of people who wanted it who he didn't want to appoint.

JOHNSTON: But, you know, I'd already made provisions to leave, and then he ultimately hired [E.] Dean Carlson.

LOOMIS: -One of the things that we haven't touched on—and I don't want to go on too long, but over the years, certainly from the late '70s into the '90s, one of the things that changed somewhat in the statehouse is that there was a growing number of lobbyists over there. How did you get along with the lobbying corps?

JOHNSTON: Oh, I got along just fine, I thought. One of the things that I was quick to pick up on—and if you stand back, it's not all that complicated—you know, some of those guys, the telephone guys— Ed Schaub, [James S.] Maag—you know, they're nice guys, you know, and they were easy guys to like, and that's in their interest. It's part of their job.

JOHNSTON: And were they effective at getting me to vote their way on some things? Probably, but only—I'm not sure that they were—any of them were effective at flipping—

JOHNSTON: But, you know, some of the things that they did, I—you know, I was in sync with. And I liked them on a personal basis.

JOHNSTON: But I also realized that once I was gone, I wouldn't hear from those guys anymore.

LOOMIS: Oh, sure, sure.

JOHNSTON: I mean, it's not they don't like me; they're on to the next guy. I mean, that's their job.

JOHNSTON: And when I left, I rarely heard from them. I still see Jim Maag a time or two here and play golf and a few others—Jerry Slaughter with the [Kansas] Med[ical] Society—

JOHNSTON: I see him from time to time. He was a cordial guy. I played a lot of golf with him.

JOHNSTON: You know, Slaughter and Maag—

LOOMIS: But you didn't—one of the noteworthy parts of this Kansas legislature is you have very—outside of Legislative Research, you really don't have much in the way of staff.

LOOMIS: And it strikes me that lobbyists often fill that void.

JOHNSTON: They do. They do. You know, I think you develop levels of trust with them in the same way you do with other people. You know, if you learn after the fact somebody's given you information that's not correct, to embellish their point of view, then, you know, you look more carefully in the future—

JOHNSTON: —or just confront them. You know, “You gave me some information. Help me understand this.” I don't remember that happening, but that's—you know, that's what I would do. But I had a good relationship with many lobbyists. Probably not too good with a few others, —who I didn't particularly care, but, you know, the [Kansas] Farm Bureau guys—I never was really keen—you know, [Paul] Fleenor and John Blythe and—you know, they were nice guys, but, you know, the Farm Bureau point of view didn't appeal to me sometimes. But they were decent guys—doing their job, trying to do their jobs.

LOOMIS: Sure. Just for one, did you deal with [Duane S.] “Pete” McGill very much?

JOHNSTON: Yeah.

LOOMIS: He was very—he couldn't have been more generous to me—again, as a younger guy hanging out over there.

JOHNSTON: Yeah, he tried to get me to join his firm on at least two occasions.

LOOMIS: Is that right?

JOHNSTON: Yeah.

LOOMIS: I'm not surprised.

JOHNSTON: I declined both times. I just didn't want to lobby, you know, at the time. It wasn't very appealing to me. I knew—yeah, McGill was probably as prominent as any of them.

JOHNSTON: I liked Pete and Lyndon. You know, played golf with him from time to time.

LOOMIS: So, one of your post-Turnpike gigs was a few months in the League of [Kansas] Municipalities, and part of that job is representing the cities.

JOHNSTON: Right.

LOOMIS: So, what did you do vis-à-vis the legislature when you were in that job for a few months?

JOHNSTON: Well, I mean, I got acquainted with a fair number of legislators. I don't want to say thirty or forty, probably a dozen to twenty—you know, key people.

JOHNSTON: I met with the speaker, and he was very cordial.

JOHNSTON: But he told me he didn't like the League. You know, didn't like the League at all. What he didn't like was the guy whose place I took, who had resigned. His name doesn't come to mind, but the League had a pretty poor reputation with many legislators because of this character and how he interacted with—

LOOMIS: So, a lobbyist or executive can do harm.

JOHNSTON: Can do much harm.

JOHNSTON: Yeah. The first day I went to the Capitol last year—and it's mostly lobbyists—with the exception of the speaker—but I had, you know, half a dozen people came up to me to say, "God, what a breath of fresh air you are compared to the guy who, you know, burned every bridge over here." "And you got a lot of bridges to repair over here."

JOHNSTON: And I heard that from several lobbyists and from several legislators.

JOHNSTON: But the speaker—you know, like I said, he was very direct about how he didn't like the League, but, you know, he went out of his way to—if he's walking across the rotunda or something, went out of his way to speak to me, to acknowledge me. I thought that was kind of odd. And he was very warm. I didn't know him. I never met him.

JOHNSTON: And he knew of my history, you know, but I really didn't know him, but he went out of his way to be cordial to me.

LOOMIS: But what was your sense—I mean, you've been Turnpike Authority and Transportation, but coming back—what was your kind of impression of the legislature circa 2014 as opposed to - twenty years before?

JOHNSTON: Oh, I'd heard that, how the legislature had institutionally changed and attitudes had—the coarsening of points of view and the personal nature of—many people just personally hated their adversaries. And it was true. And I witnessed some of that, that makes it much more difficult to do anything.

JOHNSTON: We have seen it nationally, and we see it here, and we see it in some other states.

JOHNSTON: You know, this [James] “Jim “Howell, who’s this new commissioner down here, was a representative from Derby. I went in with one of the League staff, just to introduce myself. And, you know, he lectured me for about fifteen minutes over the gun issue.

LOOMIS: This is a legislator.

JOHNSTON: Legislator. Over the gun issue, and the League had taken a position against the legislation that nullified the right of cities to regulate firearms in anyway. Just preempt it. And I hadn’t been lectured like that since I was—you know, since the nuns taught me—And, you know, it was all I could do just to kind of make my time. But he just lectured me. Didn’t ask me—I hardly opened my mouth for fifteen minutes. Just so intent, just wound tight as can be—you know, as if—I told somebody later—I said, “It’s as if — ‘I can’t wait to get done here so I can get a gun and go kill somebody.’” I mean, just so intense. And for all I know, he’s a really nice guy. I mean, I don’t know him personally. Just that attitude that he put on display to me was pretty telling.

LOOMIS: - And I think you see that in the way people are treated in hearings, things like that.

JOHNSTON: You do, from time to time. There’s always been—you know, even when I was there, there were some legislators who—and I probably am guilty of it from time to time, not as respectful to witnesses as they deserve. But I’ve heard more and more of that. As a matter of fact, there’s a legislator here in Wichita. She’s since—she was beaten, but I heard some people bragging about how, you know, “When you come before her committee, boy, she rips ya up”—you know, as if it were kind of badge of honor. So, you know, it’s different.

JOHNSTON: It’s different. I’d have a hard time, certainly, today.

LOOMIS: Right, I think it is difficult, no question. Have I missed anything? Is there something as you look back on the legislature that I just haven’t—you know, we talked about friendships, we talked a little bit about committees, leadership. I don’t know. Is there anything that pops in your mind?

JOHNSTON: No, not really. I mean, it was a rare privilege to be part of that club—for that length of time. I know now I stayed—you know, it was time for me to leave. And I’m convinced there’s lot of people who stayed way too long. There are probably not as many now as—you know, you have huge turnovers now. But certainly, at the national level, those guys hang around back there—they gerrymander themselves in forever, and they just—it’s their whole life. [Charles Patrick] “Pat” Roberts.] Look at Pat Roberts.

JOHNSTON: Seventy-eight years old. He’s been around Washington all his life. You know, he can’t let go.

JOHNSTON: But I don’t like—I’m not a term limits guy, —

JOHNSTON: —you know, for the same reason, you know, I'm not a guy that—you know, the anti-taxers always want to rig the rules to say you got to have an extraordinary majority before you can pass any tax increase.

JOHNSTON: You know, we do things by majority vote.

JOHNSTON: And extraordinary things are—extraordinary majorities are required only in a limited number of things that you want to make very difficult, —like, amending the Constitution. But I had a great time, enjoyed it, for a lot of the reasons I've covered here.

LOOMIS: I think you served at a time—you know, there's never a golden age—but it strikes me that you served with a lot of really good people.

JOHNSTON: Oh, I did, yeah. I mean, I think about, you know, the personal side of things. I can honestly say—while, you know, I wasn't warm and fuzzy with everyone, I didn't serve with anybody that I genuinely would say, "I just hate that son of a"—

JOHNSTON: I didn't feel like [that] about any of them. I don't think any of them felt that way about me. You might find somebody someplace, but I don't think very many.

JOHNSTON: Yeah, I don't think very many.

JOHNSTON: You know, getting back to the League job, it's kind of interesting—

JOHNSTON: I interviewed for the job with the League president and the incoming president. The president was the city manager of Hutchinson. The incoming president from—it was a little town out west of Wichita. I can't remember the name of it. So, I met him in Maize, and I interviewed, and it was the day that the airplane—the Skylift or the big Boeing plane landed at the wrong airport.

JOHNSTON: Do you remember that?

LOOMIS: Yeah, I do, I do.

JOHNSTON: Yeah, because when I drove to Maize, there's that airplane parked—

JOHNSTON: —at the end of the runway at [Colonel James] Jabara [Airport].

JOHNSTON: I mean, you talk about out of place!

JOHNSTON: So, I remember that day. But as it turns out, —I remember talking to him. I said, "You know, I know you're going to want to do your due diligence." And I said, "You know, ask around." I said, "You know, I don't think you're gonna find many people have many negative things to say about me."

JOHNSTON: “You might find a few, but” I said, “I don’t think very many.” Well, as it turns out, the president of the League, John Deardorf, had been in Dodge City and was very well acquainted with [Rep.] Gary [K.] Hayzlett, who had been the House Transportation chair, lived in Lakin and had served on my board for about twelve years. So, he picks the phone up and calls Gary.

JOHNSTON: “Hey, do you know this guy?”

JOHNSTON: Well, I don’t know what Gary said, but Gary had I had—

LOOMIS: Sure. Of course.

JOHNSTON: —a very warm relationship.

JOHNSTON: And then he picked the phone up and called this other guy, who I happen to have known for years and years and years.

JOHNSTON: This is just coincidence.

JOHNSTON: And he called me a few days later and offered me the job.

JOHNSTON: So, you know, going back to the bridge burning—

JOHNSTON: —and all of that, you know, people create a lot of problems for themselves and they don’t have to.

JOHNSTON: But I had a great run. You know, my time as a cabinet officer was terrific.

JOHNSTON: The Turnpike job was a blessing, and I’ve been very, very blessed.

LOOMIS: - you have—

[End of interview.]