

Interview of Steve Morris by Joan Wagnon, July 15, 2020
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Joan Wagnon: Good morning. Today is July 15, 2020 at 10:00 in the morning in the Senate Chambers of the Kansas State House in Topeka, Kansas. I'm Joan Wagnon. I'm the president of the Kansas Oral History Project and a former legislator. We are a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing former legislators and other government officials. Transcripts and videotapes of the interviews will be accessible to researchers and educators interested in how public policy was shaped. These interviews are funded in part by a grant from Humanities Kansas and from private contributions. Audio and video equipment is being operated by David Heinemann, also a former legislator and Speaker Pro Tem of the Kansas House.

Today we are going to interview former Senate president Steve Morris from Hugoton, Kansas. Welcome, Steve.

Steve Morris: Thank you, Joan. It's nice to be here. Nice to be back.

JW: I'm really glad that you could make the trip all the way in from western Kansas to help us out. Let's start and talk a little bit about your committee assignments. Committees in the Senate meet all the time, and it seems like senators serve on five, six, seven committees. When I started looking through that list, in '93 through '96, you were vice chair of Agriculture, but they also had you on Ways and Means and Energy and Natural Resources. In '97 through 2000, you moved up to chair of the Agriculture Committee. You were still on Ways and Means and Energy and Natural Resources. 2001 to 2004, you had moved up to chair of Ways and Means. That's a pretty interesting progression through the committees, and you were still on Agriculture. In 2005, you ran for Senate president, and you were eight years as president of this august body.

SM: That's correct. You covered it.

JW: Quite a career.

SM: Yes.

JW: We always start these interviews talking a little about your background. Are you a native Kansan?

SM: Yes, born in Garden City.

JW: Okay. And your occupation?

SM: I'm actually retired from the Air Force. I still do a little farming, but I've cut back a lot from what I used to do in farming. Of course, I'm retired from the legislature, too.

JW: Well, you were a fighter pilot in Vietnam, weren't you?

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SM: I was a pilot. I actually flew reconnaissance and aerial refueling, not really fighters.

JW: Was your family involved in politics at all?

SM: My mother, when I was growing up, was vice chair of the county Republican] Party. I remember going with her to a lot of events and sort of planting the seed.

JW: Was it Finney County?

SM: Stevens County.

JW: Stevens, okay, because you've been in Hugoton for a long time.

SM: Yes.

JW: And you were also on the school board?

SM: I spent sixteen years on our local school board prior to being elected to the Kansas Senate.

JW: Did that whet your appetite to run?

SM: It did.

JW: Did you have a mentor in politics?

SM: When [U.S. Senator] Bob Dole first ran for Congress, I was in the eighth grade, and he was in and out of our farm home a couple of times. That really was impressive to me, to get to see him in that venue. Then later when I was in college, in fact when I was a senior in college, I was walking out of the Student Union at Kansas State and ran into a fellow by the name of Odd Williams. Odd's father started the Williams Fund at KU. I've known him all my life. He was the campaign chair for Nelson Rockefeller who was running for president that year.

JW: I remember that race.

SM: They invited me to go have lunch with them, which I did. It was pretty heady for somebody in college to have that opportunity.

JW: Yes.

SM: Anyway, we got to talking politics, and he asked about my background and suggested that maybe I think about politics at some point. So that planted another seed.

JW: You're good at letting seeds grow.

SM: Right.

JW: You did a lot in local politics, and, if my memory is correct, you chaired [U.S. Senator] Nancy Kassebaum's Senate race in '84 at least in Stevens County?

SM: Yes.

JW: And you did something for [President George H.W. Bush for President in '88.

SM: Yes, at the county level.

JW: It still counts.

SM: Yes.

JW: So when you decided that you were going to leave the school board and run for the state Senate, what was the impetus? If my memory is correct, [Senator] Leroy Hayden, a Democrat, had been in that seat for a long time.

SM: He had. he was actually in for sixteen years. He and I had visited over time. Four years prior to running, he said if I did not run against him, he wouldn't run next time. Well, you know how that goes. Anyway, I thought about it for years and wanted to wait until our family was a little older. When I ran, our youngest daughter still had two years left in high school, but the other two had already gone to college, so I thought it was the right time.

JW: And you ran against Leroy.

SM: Yes.

JW: I was looking at the vote totals. In 1992, you defeated an incumbent, 15,178 to 7,456. That's pretty decisive.

SM: It was, but we worked really hard for a solid year on that campaign.

JW: I'm sure you did.

SM: And Leroy, we weren't adversaries. It was a nice race. It was positive.

JW: Good, and I'm glad you won. We're going to turn now to talking about your time in the legislature, which is really what the interview is about. There were a whole lot of issues that came to bear in twenty legislative sessions. I brought a big thick file of all of the legislative reports from those years. I don't think we need to talk about each year and each issue, but I would like to ask you to reflect on some of the highlights. One of the things—and I want to

know what your involvement was. I want to know how the issues emerged, how the governor acted, just kind of the inside skinny on all of this. So talk to me about gaming.

SM: Gaming was an interesting issue. For a long time prior to I think 2006, I didn't think expanding gaming in Kansas was a very good idea. So I resisted that. But when we looked at what was happening around us, the states of Oklahoma and Missouri, Nebraska and Colorado, there was a lot of gaming opportunities for our citizens. We also had four Indian casinos in Kansas that the state was getting zero from those four casinos.

Oklahoma has more casinos than any other state except Nevada. Nebraska didn't have any casinos, but there was one in Council Bluffs that was very close. Of course, Colorado and Kansas City both had casinos. I represented Garden City at the time. At the Garden City Airport, there was a specific area for casino players to park. So that weighs [on my mind] a lot. There were a lot of charters going out of state.

Finally we decided that even though a lot of people were not too thrilled with expanding gaming in Kansas, it was incumbent upon us to try to get some of those dollars that were going out of state. So that was the reason that we started down that path. It wasn't easy. In 2006, we developed a bill that was pretty comprehensive, but we didn't have the votes in the Senate to pass it. The next year, in 2007, the House actually passed the same bill that we developed the previous year which shocked us all that the House passed it. It came over to us, and I held on to it for a few days because I knew what would happen as soon as I let the bill out. Someone would make the motion to concur. When we didn't have enough votes to pass that concur, it would kill the bill.

So finally a few days later, I let the bill out, and, sure enough, immediately there was a motion to concur. We'd actually thought maybe if we could get it in conference [committee], we might be able to talk some people into voting for it over the break between the end of the regular session and the wrap-up session, but the people who were fighting against it didn't want that to happen.

We ended up with a twelve-hour filibuster, which is the only time I ever remember that kind of filibuster. It was a true filibuster. It was interesting to have to preside under a filibuster.

JW: You were stuck up there in that chair.

SM: Yes. Eventually a couple of senators that had been "no" votes on this were so upset at the high-handed way that the opposition had handled this, that they decided to change their votes. Well, we didn't tell anybody. Finally, after twelve hours, we decided to go ahead and bring everything to vote. Needless to say, it was a shock, but we had twenty-one votes for that.

JW: Who was your majority leader in that?

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SM: Derek Schmidt¹, and John Vratil was the vice president.

JW: So you had a leadership team that helped you.

SM: Yes.

JW: And the governor was not opposed or was opposed?

SM: It was Governor [Kathleen] Sebelius, and she was supportive of it. We decided to try to limit the gaming in Kansas to four zones, one of those being in the Wichita area, in Dodge City, Wyandotte County, and then southeast Kansas. The first three were built within two or three years, and then the one in southeast Kansas just come online a year or two ago.

It's been pretty good for the state coffers, I think, a couple hundred million dollars a year. Who knows what will happen this year? The whole idea was to try to capture some of those dollars that were leaving the state.

JW: Did you suffer any political repercussions because of your advocacy for this? This is a reversal of prior position.

SM: Yes. Some of my friends weren't too happy.

JW: You're looking at David [Heinemann].

SM: Yes, but otherwise it worked out all right.

JW: Another issue that keeps coming through loud and strong towards the end of your Senate presidency was coal-fired plants. Were you involved in that?

SM: Yes.

JW: That was or was not in your district?

SM: It was. The issue was that Sunflower Electric who owns a current plant in Holcomb, Kansas, a coal-fired power plant and one of the cleanest plants as far as coal is concerned in the country. They wanted to expand.

At that time, natural gas was extremely high, maybe \$10 or \$12 an mcf, and it really wasn't economically feasible to put a gas plant in there. So they developed a strategy to add a second plant in Holcomb, and it was going to be significantly cleaner than the already clean plant that was based in Holcomb. They went through all the licensing process, health and environment, and ultimately we had a vote on it, and we voted to approve it, and the governor at the time

¹ Derek Schmidt subsequently left the Senate in 2010 to become the 44th Attorney General of Kansas.

was not in favor of it, vetoed it, and I think we ended up with a second vote, and she also vetoed that.

That was a number of years ago. Recently Sunflower has decided not to pursue that, but in the intervening years, the price of gas has gone down significantly, probably \$2, sometimes less than \$2 an mcf versus \$10 to \$12 back then. so there probably will be no longer a second coal plant in Holcomb.

JW: Yes. You served on Energy and Natural Resources for most of that time. Was that a helpful committee assignment when you attacked issues like the coal-fired plant?

SM: It was. Of course, [I was] representing the Hugoton Field, which at the time was one of the largest natural gas fields in the world. That was a natural for me to serve on that committee.

JW: In this special session of 2005, what was that about?

SM: It was about education. The Supreme Court basically ordered us to do more for education, and this was after the legislative session was over in 2005. Governor Sebelius decided we should come back for a special session to address this, and she visited with leadership and indicated that she thought it was a good idea to plan ahead for that special session. I thought it was a good idea, too. I actually had the Senate Ways and Means Committee and the Senate Education Committee both come back and develop legislation that we could pass in the early part of the session.

The House had a number of members at that time that wanted to defy the Court. So they did no planning. We entered a special session. By the way, that special session was held in the old Supreme Court room, which was very tight to have the whole Senate in there plus visitors. It was the first time major legislation had ever been passed outside of the Senate chamber. The Senate chamber was being remodeled at the time.

JW: Of course it was, yes.

SM: Anyway, the first day of the session, we passed the legislation that was necessary to satisfy the Court. Twelve days later, the House finally came around and passed the same legislation.

JW: Who was the speaker in the House?

SM: [Representative] Doug Mays.

JW: Can you talk a little bit about the back and forth between the House and the Senate? You said they're dragging their feet. You're pushing forward, being very methodical about how to plan, and you're working with the governor. Talk a little bit about how that worked.

SM: Then the majority of the Senate was composed of moderate Republicans and Democrats. Of course, we had a number of very conservative senators, but the majority of the House were very conservative folks. I don't remember the exact split between Democrats and Republicans there, but the majority of the Republicans were very conservative. Sometimes their view of things differed from our view of what needed to be done.

JW: You're smiling. That's putting it mildly, isn't it?

SM: Yes.

JW: I think one of the things that comes out when you read through the clips and read through all of the news articles and things is the growing sentiment on the part of the conservatives that government needed to change quite a lot, and moderate Republicans and Democrats didn't particularly agree on that. So that decade where you served as Senate president was fraught with those kinds of issues, wasn't it?

SM: Yes, it was. It made things difficult at times.

JW: I'm sure it did.

SM: We actually, through my tenure, the majority of the Senate were moderate Republicans and Democrats. That made it feasible to actually accomplish things. But as we talked a few minutes ago, sometimes we were at loggerheads with the House and had to work around that.

JW: Transportation was a huge issue. It dogged Governor [Mike] Hayden through his term as governor, but we finally got a plan. Then something happened in 2010 on transportation. Would you talk about that? What it looked like, who was for it? Who was against it? How did it pass?

SM: [In] 2010, we were the only state in the Union that passed a comprehensive transportation plan.

JW: The only state.

SM: The only state.

JW: Oh, my.

SM: Of course, we were in the middle of the recession, and it was very hard to do that. We did that in spite of the Kansas Chamber's opposition. They said they would support a transportation plan, but they didn't want to have to pay for it.

So we proceeded and passed a ten-year transportation plan. However, when the next governor, Governor [Sam] Brownback was elected in 2010, and we'll probably talk about this in a few minutes.

JW: Yes, we will.

SM: His tax experiment, he ended up taking probably close to two billion dollars out of that transportation plan to help fill the deficit caused by his tax plan. Because of that, a number of projects that were scheduled to be done in that transportation plan were not accomplished.

JW: Was Robin Jennison speaker at this time?

SM: No. He was speaker before that. I don't remember the exact time.

JW: I interviewed him, and he had a really interesting story. I guess [Bill] Graves was governor.

SM: Yes.

JW: Graves was proposing a transportation plan.

SM: The '99 plan.

JW: Yes, and Robin took Graves's numbers and put it in the House bill and passed it. Of course, it wouldn't work. So the Senate had to fix that. You were not involved in any of that, were you?

SM: Well, through Ways and Means, on the periphery.

JW: But the 2010 transportation plan was a big deal until Brownback raided the coffers.

SM: Yes, it was.

JW: One of the things that often happens when you're in leadership is that you're putting out fires. I bet you put out a lot of them. Can you think of something that you did that allowed you to put something forward? I think the KU, K State, Wichita State engineering plan might be a good example of that.

SM: It is a good example.

JW: Talk about that, please.

SM: As you mentioned, the majority of the legislators' time is spent trying to put out fires that are burning at the time. There's not a lot of time or resources left to do much forward thinking. In 2007 maybe, I became aware of the engineering shortage in Kansas. At that time, the major engineering firms in Johnson County in Wichita were a couple of thousand engineers short.

Stuart Bell who was the dean of the KU School of Engineering at the time was visiting with me. By the way, he's now the president of Alabama University.

JW: Oh, really?

SM: Anyway, he mentioned to me that he had one of his current graduates, a female graduate that started out at \$100,000 straight out of school, which I was pretty impressed with. We talked about how we should try to address the problem. I decided to invite him and John English, the dean at Kansas State University, and the lady, I don't remember her name, from Wichita State Engineering School. We met several times and ultimately developed a plan to try and address this.

Kansas was losing a lot of their engineers. Firms were hiring engineers from other parts of the country, East Coast and West Coast, and those folks, once they got settled, a lot of times they didn't have a lot of loyalty to Kansas. So they'd leave, and she'd have to get somebody else to retrain them.

So we thought it was best if we could try to keep and train our own engineers. We felt like K-12 schools needed to do a better job of promoting engineering. So that was part of the project, trying to get counselors to be up to speed on what's involved in engineering curriculum.

This comprehensive plan took a couple of years. This was during the recession. We didn't really have money to do anything until I think it was 2011. Governor Brownback wasn't very thrilled with me. So I asked Senator [Carolyn] McGinn to take the lead and get it through Ways and Means, which she did. She did a good job doing that. We passed a ten-year, ten-million-dollar-a-year program that was meant to do some capital projects for all three universities and then basically changing the whole engineering atmosphere in Kansas. The ultimate goal was to provide 65 percent more engineers in this state by the time the ten years was over, and I think we've already reached that goal.

JW: That is impressive. We've done a lot of interviews going all the way back to the 1960s, and it seemed like that kind of forward thinking, solving problems, was something that everybody did...[interruption] So as the conflict grew between parties and intraparties, there was less time to do that kind of thing, it seemed like.

SM: That's true.

JW: So that example stands out, I believe, as a really good example of leadership. [Do you have something further you want to say or want to talk about?] Okay. You worked with [Governor] Graves.

SM: Yes.

JW: You worked with [Governor] Kathleen Sebelius, and you worked with [Governor] Mark Parkinson.

SM: And [Governor] Joan Finney.

JW: Oh, Joan Finney in '93, when you came in. Is there anything about their leadership styles and their interaction—and I'm leaving Sam Brownback out of that. We're going to talk about him next. Is there anything in their leadership styles in the governor's office that strikes you as something that we ought to remember and highlight. Part of this interview might be used as a training film, talking about what constitutes good government. Any remarks on those styles?

SM: It felt like all of those governors that you mentioned were nice to work with. They worked with both sides of the aisle. I didn't ever perceive them as being overly partisan, which was very good to foster the legislative process. Kathleen Sebelius was probably more proactive than the other three. Governor Graves did a very nice job, but I didn't really perceive a lot of controversy during his time. Mark Parkinson, I was really disappointed that he was only governor for two years.

JW: So was I.

SM: I felt like he was an excellent governor.

JW: So did I.

SM: Governor Finney only served one term, and I was just getting started in the Senate when she was governor. And I might mention also that the current governor, Laura Kelly, and I served several years together in the Senate.

JW: That's right. You did.

SM: I was very pleased with her election and thought she was a very intelligent, astute legislator. She's doing the same things as governor.

JW: Good. So let's talk about Brownback. He came in in 2010, and his first term, according to the news articles that I've been reading and some of my own observations, he was dealing with a budget that had been left for him by Mark Parkinson. It was 2012, when he first really got a chance to put his imprimatur on that legislative session. And his tax plan, which redistributed all the taxes, has had a profound impact on Kansas. Do you want to talk a little bit about the plan and what it was like? You were president of the Senate. You were ostensibly as a member of his party willing to help him get his plan through.

SM: Sort of.

JW: Sort of. It had to be tough.

SM: It was quite a saga. As you mentioned, Governor Brownback [was elected] in 2010 and started his term in 2011. We were still in the midst of the recession, and money was extremely tight. In 2012, we were just starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel, and revenue was hopefully coming back to somewhat of a normal level.

&However in January of 2012, when Governor Brownback delivered his State of the State message, he indicated that he wanted to start down the path of doing away with income tax. We thought, "We can't do it. We're just now coming out of a recession." He wanted to be like Texas. Texas doesn't have an income tax, but they have tourists, and they have all kinds of other things in their economy that we don't have, and they can get by without an income tax, but he wanted to go down that path.

&The proposal that he delivered at the State of the State, the House Tax Committee actually took that up and pretty well covered everything he wanted to do in his tax bill. The tax bill came to the Senate, and I need to say that in 2008, when we had our committee selections, we didn't have enough moderate Republicans to chair all the major committees. Since we were in a major recession, we felt like if we put some of the elder conservatives on the Tax Committee, surely nothing bad could happen. That was a big mistake.

&In 2012, when the House passed that tax bill to us, we sent it to the Senate Tax Committee. As you can imagine, they pretty much copied what the House did.

JW: Senator [Les] Donovan was chairing that Senate Tax Committee, having chaired the House Tax Committee in the past.

SM: Yes. So that bill came to the Senate floor, very draconian, and we actually—there were a couple of amendments that were put on after the bill came to the floor. One was to restore the exemption for charitable deductions and another for mortgage interest deductions which made the fiscal note much worse than it already was.

But we defeated the bill on the Senate floor. Almost immediately after that, my assistant came and got me. I was presiding. She said, "The governor has to talk to you." So I stepped down. The vice president took over. I started talking to Governor Brownback, and he immediately started pleading with me. He pleaded and pleaded and pleaded for us to reconsider our action. He said, "I know it will probably bankrupt the state. It's terrible public policy. It will never become law," but it was close to the end of the session, and that was the only tax bill that could go to conference². So he just wanted that bill, if we could reconsider and go to conference, we could come up with something better.

² Conference committees generally consist of 3 members from the House and 3 from the Senate. Their function is to reconcile differences between the two bodies and to produce a conference committee report that each body can vote to approve or disapprove, sending the compromise position to the Governor.

Working with other governors, I assumed that their word was good. I was naive enough to think that his word was good. He assured us it wasn't going to become law. So I visited with the senators and asked them to reconsider, and they did. So we passed it with the understanding that it would just go into conference, and nothing bad was going to happen.

It did go to conference, and my leadership team, Senator Vratil and Senator [Jay] Emler and I developed an alternative tax plan. It was fairly modest, but it was something we felt like we could live with, but the speaker and the governor refused to even look at it in conference.

JW: I can't remember who the speaker was.

SM: [Representative] Mike O'Neal.

JW: That's right.

SM: So they did go to conference with it and developed a bill that was almost as bad as the first bill. The day that we were going to do a debate on the conference committee report on the Senate floor, the governor went to the House Republican Caucus and ask them to concur on what we passed, and he said it would never become law. They did that in a hurry. While we were debating the conference committee report on the Senate floor, the House went in session and hurried it up and voted to concur with the House bill that we passed. Ultimately, Brownback signed the bill and turned Kansas finance into total chaos. I think most people are familiar with what happened after that.

JW: Just for the purpose of the record, that tax bill was a major overhaul of the personal income tax among other things, and it exempted subchapter S and LLCs from taxation.

SM: That's correct.

JW: Which was flying under the guise of "This is for small business," but the truth is that it helped a lot more than small business. Is that correct?

SM: Yes. Then after that, the number of businesses that were set up differently ended up all of a sudden becoming LLCs. The fiscal note at the time—I don't remember what it was—it ended up being several times higher than what they estimated it to be. To this day, in 2020, we're still seeing the effects of that tax reduction.

JW: That's a trick that sometimes happens on the legislative floor, that if you put something in conference, you can always concur with the original bill. Is that correct?

SM: Yes. When the House voted to concur on that, if we had been successful in closing debate on the conference committee report and voted it down, then it would have killed everything. That's why they were in such a hurry to concur before we could actually do that.

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JW: Do you think that was Mike O'Neal's strategy, or do you think that came out of the governor's office, or do you know?

SM: I'm speculating that it was both.

JW: So that was the 2012 session.

SM: Yes.

JW: How did you feel?

SM: Terrible.

JW: I bet.

SM: I felt betrayed, and I felt bad that I had asked the senators to reconsider that bill, trusting the governor.

JW: Tim Carpenter wrote a very nice article in the Topeka Capital Journal that vindicated you quite a bit, but it was undoubtedly difficult.

SM: It was.

JW: So here we are in late May in 2012, with this tax bill going into law. You had to decide if you were going to run again for the legislature. You served eight years as Senate president. Don't Senate presidents usually step down after two terms?

SM: Historically, I don't know that anyone has ever served more than eight years, but there's no rule or no real tradition there. Some just serve one term. Dave Kerr just served one term. Dick Bond served one term. Bud Burke actually served two terms. Going back, I don't remember, Ross Doyen maybe served two terms.

JW: I think so.

SM: I didn't think that that was necessarily an impediment. So I decided to run again.

JW: Talk to me about that election of 2012. That had to have been very different than what you had experienced in previous elections.

SM: It was different. We had twenty-one races that we were monitoring. A couple of weeks before the election, polls were showing everyone was in good shape, but about that time, the Kansas Chamber and the Americans for Prosperity and others started sending out very negative postcards. I think the average was like forty or forty-five postcards in that two-week time.

SM: All of them were misleading at best. Most of the time, they were just flat-out lies. But people weren't used to getting that kind of election material, and when you see that over and over and over again, it starts to make an effect. So we lost sixteen out of those twenty-one races, all moderate Republicans. It was devastating.

JW: Was this the first time that you saw large-scale intervention into races in primaries? There had been negative campaigns between Republicans and Democrats for a long time.

SM: Yes.

JW: But this was against Republicans in a Republican primary, right?

SM: It was. The election prior to that in 2010, there was some of that that went on in the primary, the Republican primaries, but the moderates prevailed that time because they didn't have quite as much to deal with as what we had in 2012. But it sort of set a bad precedent for elections in Kansas.

JW: It certainly did. I pulled this quote out of some publication, probably Wikipedia, which is the fount of all knowledge. "Seven or eight moderate state Senate Republicans, including Steve Morris, were targeted by the Koch brothers, defeated in the 2012 Republican primary, giving incumbent governor Sam Brownback the margin he needed to restructure state taxation, exempting S filers such as Koch Industries from income taxes. Morris lost to Larry Powell 5,106 to 4,737 on August 7, 2012." That's not exactly correct because that bill passed before that, right?

SM: Yes. The following year in 2013, they actually made it worse, the legislature did. The reduction in taxes continued only on a larger scale.

JW: If I recall, it was the "glide path to zero" that Brownback was pushing. Is that correct?

SM: That's correct.

JW: Enough of that. Let's talk a little bit about leadership. Some would say that the most important job of the speaker and Senate president is to close down the legislative session. The 2002 session went for 107 days. The 2012 session went 100 days. Do you remember why those sessions were going so long?

SM: I'm a little fuzzy on 2002. 2012, the main reason was redistricting.

JW: Can you talk a little about that?

SM: Yes. Redistricting occurs every ten years. There's a reason that Kansas did it in 2012 instead of 2011 after the census, and I don't remember what that reason is, something to do with military voting.

JW: I think that's correct.

SM: Anyway, prior to the 2012 session, the speaker, Mike O'Neal and myself had an agreement that we would honor the House-passed map, and they would honor the Senate-passed map. The House passed their map, and we passed it. But the House decided that they were going to redo our map to their liking. This went on and on and on. The gist of the fight was the very conservative legislators and the governor wanted districts that were gerrymandered to benefit the ultraconservative Republicans.

JW: Yes.

SM: And it would hinder the re-election of moderate Republicans and Democrats. Their map that the House drew did that. Of course, we didn't want any part of that. I went to the governor one day and said, "This is hurting our moderate Republicans." He said, "Well, I want to hurt the Democrats, too."

We fought. Senator Jay Emler was the majority leader at the time. He spent days and days and days working on maps to try to come up with the solution. Ultimately, we decided to adjourn the session. We knew that the courts were going to have to do this. Later that summer, the Kansas Supreme Court drew the maps themselves with help from legislative research. They drew the House map and the Senate map. That was a major reason why that session lasted so long.

JW: And when they put those maps in place, they were only a few days before the filing deadline is my recollection.

SM: It was after the filing deadline.

JW: Was it after the filing deadline?

SM: Yes. That was another reason Brownback wanted rid of me. I resisted.

JW: You had filed.

SM: Yes, and he didn't like it that I had resisted his map idea.

JW: Sure. That was interesting. Can you think of any other times when you had a hard time closing down the session?

SM: In 2002, I remember why it lasted so long. We just started the recession after 9/11. Money was extremely tight. We had to scrounge for every penny that we could come up with. There were a lot of things that we had to do that we weren't too crazy about. We had to raise taxes on tobacco and other things. We actually changed the date to pay the second part of property

tax from June 20th to May 10th, a number of things that we worked and worked and worked in order to come up with a balanced budget. I think that was a primary reason why we had to extend the session. Dave Kerr was president at that time, and I was chair of Ways and Means, a very difficult time to be chair of Ways and Means.

JW: It certainly was. Senate presidents have to work with House speakers, Democrat leaders, and others. Who do you remember having a particularly good style to work with? I'm not as much interested in who it was as what the style was like. What makes it easy to work across the aisle or work across the Chamber?

SM: I will name the name. Anthony Hensley has been the minority leader since Jerry Karr left the Senate. I don't remember what year that was but for a number of years, and he was easy to work with. He and I would get together and talk strategy. I think that was one of the keys to being able to get things done when the minority leader and the Senate president worked together.

As far as House speakers, it was usually a little more difficult to work with them because all the House speakers that were there when I was Senate president were much more conservative than what I was. We didn't always agree on everything, and it made it difficult to try to be in the session sometimes and to get things done. But ultimately we did get things finished.

JW: That's a good point. Would you agree or not, in the twenty years you were in the state Senate, that the tone and culture of the legislature changed significantly?

SM: It did. When I was elected in '92, we actually had twenty-one new senators out of forty. Over time, my last year in the Senate, there were just two of us left out of that twenty-one, Senator Hensley and myself. That led obviously to a large turnover, but during that time, partisanship became much more prevalent. We talked earlier about the elections. They became a lot more negative, negative advertising.

So it has changed, and I think now it's gone from people getting together, Democrats and Republicans and going to dinner and having nice conversations to maybe actually considering those people enemies from each other, which is really too bad. It's not what people want, and it's not what should happen.

JW: I want to pick up on that last sentence you just said, "It's not what people want, and it's not what should happen." Kansans are perhaps conservative by nature.

SM: Yes.

JW: But the brand of conservatism that seems to be getting elected, is that representative of what you thought your constituents wanted?

SM: I don't believe it is. As everyone knows, Kansas is a highly Republican state. A number of the voters, when they're Republican and they see a Republican running, they think, well, they're Republican, and the person running is a Republican, so everything should be okay. I don't think that they spend enough time really analyzing that person that's running, what their belief is and how they would perform in the legislature. Sometimes I think that's why we get people who are out of step with the majority of Kansans because Kansas, as you said, Kansans are conservative, but they're not crazy conservative. I think that's what's happened to a number of people in the legislature, they're crazy conservatives.

JW: There have been a number of theories put forth about why there's that kind of social conservative, crazy conservative, whatever you want to call them, why they keep getting elected. Are they just better at running races? Are they more willing to take extreme stands? Have you developed any theories on that? I'm not trying to lead you. I'm just trying to get you to think about why that might have happened.

SM: I think the people that follow them, their political beliefs, are more dedicated. They get out and work, and they have more of a long-range plan than a lot of the more moderate Republicans and Democrats. They're looking at the longer term and thinking that eventually they can take control as they have of the legislature and starting down the path of starving government to death and basically making government smaller.

JW: In your view, when those efforts have been brought forward, have they worked?

SM: I don't think they have. As I mentioned earlier, we're still seeing some effects of the Brownback tax experiment.

JW: That was his philosophy.

SM: Yes. For instance, the Department of Commerce when the current governor took over, they had 40 percent less in their budget than what they did when I was in the legislature. I think a lot of people are familiar with what's happening with foster care. There's been a lot of publicity in recent days about a settlement on that to try to get that straightened out, but that was another direct result of a major loss of revenue in that system. We mentioned the highway program to where multiple projects were scheduled to be completed between 2010 and 2020 were not accomplished because of the loss of revenue. Being from a rural area, we depend on good highways. We crisscross the state, and that's key to economic development for our state to have a good set of public highways. We have the fourth largest number of miles of highways than any state in the Union.

JW: And we drive on all of them.

SM: That's right.

Interview of Steve Morris by Joan Wagnon, July 15, 2020

JW: Now that you've left the legislature, you haven't been exactly out of politics. You served I think at the end of your term as president of NCSL.

SM: Yes, the last two years of my Senate term, I was also president of the National Conference of State Legislators.

JW: What was that like?

SM: That was really an honor to be able to do that, to be the president of a 7,400 legislator organization. That's how many total legislators are actually part of NCSL. It was just thrilling to do that. In recent years, when NCSL has their annual meetings, they've invited past presidents to come back and participate in their annual meetings. We've done that, and we've enjoyed that.

JW: I bet so. That organization continues to be very well respected.

SM: Yes.

JW: And offers good help and support to legislators all over the country.

SM: The last year, I was actually president of the NCSL Foundation at the same time that I was president of the organization.

JW: Good. And didn't Governor Kelly ask you to co-chair her Tax Reform Commission?

SM: Yes. I started last year, 2019. We started meeting in September. Janis Lee is a former senator from Smith County. She and I are co-chairs. And the Council is made up of nineteen members from across the state with different backgrounds. It's sort of a wide cross-section of people which is good. We met several times last fall and delivered a preliminary report to the governor for her use to present to the legislature.

Actually our last meeting was in February to sort of see where we were with this project. As everyone knows this pandemic has interfered with a lot of things including that. Yesterday, we actually had a planning meeting with Janis and myself and the Secretary of Revenue [Mark Burghart] and a couple of others to try to determine where we go from here. We're probably going to have a Zoom meeting in August, and we'll see how that goes. We're still planning on trying to do a final report by the end of December of this year. We'll see what happens with the pandemic, but we have a lot of work to do. Yesterday's discussion identified a lot of options that we should present to the governor, and strategy that we need to look at to keep the state on a strong financial footing.

JW: I was glad to see the preliminary report included going back to the three-legged stool concept, where we have a balance between income, sales and property taxes. That formula has kept Kansas stable for seventy-five years.

SM: A couple of other things in that report were significant. There's been a lot of discussion over the years about food sales tax in Kansas. We have a high sales tax rate, but take food off of the sales tax plan would be a terrific hit to the general fund. We felt like that can't happen.

JW: Can't do it.

SM: What we recommended was a food sales tax rebate.

JW: Which is what we used to have.

SM: Yes, until Brownback destroyed it.

JW: Until Brownback got rid of it.

SM: So that was one of the recommendations. We also recommended that online shopping-- we're collecting money from online companies but online companies, such as Amazon that handle third-party products, they don't collect sales tax from them. That's a significant amount of money. One of our recommendations was that we actually put the third-party facilitators in law so that we could collect that tax, too.

It's a fairness issue. We're looking at our Main Street Kansas businesses, and they have to compete against people that don't have to charge sales tax. It's certainly a fairness issue. So that was another recommendation.

JW: And taxing digital goods. I'll take my advocacy hat off in just a second, but I couldn't resist throwing that in.

SM: I know that Massachusetts passed that a year ago. They estimated a fiscal note of about 45 million, and that ended up with four times that much before this pandemic even started.

JW: The country's buying patterns constantly change. If you don't adjust your tax code to make sure you haven't *de facto* let something go without taxation when other things are—

SM: People they have cable TV, and you pay taxes on the cable TV.

JW: Anyway, we can have that conversation another time. I need to wind this interview up. As you look back at your time in the legislature, what are you most proud of?

SM: We mentioned the engineering project. I'm certainly proud of that. I feel good about being able to work both sides of the aisle and not being partisan. We did the transportation plan in 2010, and we actually passed a sales tax increase in 2010 that was supposed to be there for only three years because of the recession, and that was hard to do back then. I was proud of that. Then the governor decided he wanted to keep and ultimately asked the legislature to add

another cent to the sales tax that made our sales tax one of the highest in the nation. It's a problem today.

JW: It is a problem.

SM: And I'm proud of the friends that I had in the legislature, legislative research. I worked very closely with them obviously and the advisors and all the people in this building. I should also mentioned that we did the restoration of the Capitol Building, most of it happened when I was Senate president. I feel really proud of that.

I probably should quit talking about Governor Brownback, but when he came in, we had one wing left to do, and he wanted to board it up and not do it. We had to fix that. Then he didn't want to do anything for the dome, and we had to drag him kicking and screaming to get the dome finished.

JW: I interviewed Dick, who I guess was [Senate] president just before you.

SM: Dick Bond?

JW: Yes, Dick Bond.

SM: It was actually started under him.

JW: [I asked Bond] About why they did the Capitol, and his comment was, "I told people when I left, if you leave things unfinished, they'll have to finish them." So that was his strategy to keep them from boarding it up or stopping.

SM: When you look at the brown dome, it sure looks a lot better than that green dome to me.

JW: It does. It's beautiful, and you did that.

SM: Yes.

JW: So, you can walk through this building with a sense of pride. Is that what you're telling me?

SM: Absolutely?

JW: And a sense of accomplishment.

SM: Yes. And J. E. Dunn, the contractor did a great job.

JW: I think this chamber is a testament to why that work was important.

Interview of Steve Morris by Joan Wagnon, July 15, 2020

SM: Yes. I had trouble with the speaker during some of those times. They didn't want to go along with some of this. So, I had to assert myself to make sure we got it done.

JW: Well, thank you.

SM: You're welcome.

JW: For what you've done in this chamber, for what you've done for twenty years for the state of Kansas and basically all your life, and I'm glad you're not finished yet.

SM: Thank you.

JW: Thank you, Steve. It's been a pleasure.

SM: Thank you, Joan.

[End of File]