

Interview of Bill Reardon by Jim McLean, August 2, 2019  
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Jim McLean: Hello, I'm Jim McLean. I'm a reporter and editor for the Kansas news service, which is a collaboration of public radio stations across the state. We're doing this interview on August 2, 2019, with Bill Reardon from Kansas City, Kansas. He was a long-time member of the Kansas House of Representatives. This interview is funded in part by Humanities Kansas and will be transcribed and placed in the Kansas Historical Society for viewing by the public. Bill, welcome.

Bill Reardon: Thank you, Jim.

JM: Good to see you again.

BR: Good to see you.

JM: Do you like being back here in the House Chamber? How long has it been since you were here?

BR: It's been a few years. I retired in 2005, but I began lobbying the following year for the Kansas City, Kansas school district. I'd been on the Education Committee most of my career here. I retired from lobbying in 2015. It's been a few years since I've been here on the floor.

JM: You just couldn't stay away.

BR: Couldn't stay away.

JM: We should mention, too, you had a thirty-year career in the Kansas House. For much of that time, you were the chair of the Education Committee when the Democrats had the majority. Otherwise you were the ranking member of that committee. You chaired the Federal State of Affairs committee as well, and you served in leadership [as] Speaker pro tem. Are all those things correct?

BR: Right.

JM: You were right in the thick of it for most of your time there.

BR: I served thirty years. I wouldn't say that if it was thirty years in the US House, you'd be middle of the pack, but you would certainly have many, many US House members that had served longer. In the Kansas legislature, I assume in most state legislatures, thirty years is a really long time. For even years before I retired, they have an unofficial title of Dean of the House. It's the person who has served the longest. So, I was Dean of the House the last number of years that I served in the House. Anthony Hensley was doing some research on something else and said that I was the longest-serving member in Kansas history in the House of Representatives, serving thirty years. In the four years I've been gone, a lot of people that were not that many years behind me are still here.

JM: Do you think that record might be overtaken?

BR: Yes. It's not a record that I really relished because Dean of the House, that term is more a euphemism for "Oldest Guy Here." If it's not me anymore, I'm perfectly okay with that.

JM: I think that the gentleman who's filming us here, Dave Heinemann from Garden City had that honorarium for a while. That's correct.

BR: He did have that term. That's correct.

JM: He was here for a long, long time, too. Just some quick biographical stuff to get things started. Are you a native Kansan?

BR: I'm a native Kansan, yes.

JM: You were born where?

BR: Kansas City, Kansas. Both of my parents are native Kansans.

JM: Are you the first one in your family to have any interest in politics? Do you have a history there, too?

BR: No, I have a history there. My father served as a clerk of the district court, which at that time was an elected office. He served in Wyandotte County, clerk of the district court. He did that for a few years.

My earliest memories of politics was that, as clerk of the district court, he was placed in charge of serving as the facilitator for people who had come here from other countries and were trying to establish citizenship. To my knowledge, virtually all of them were Mexican, people who had come from Mexico to be citizens. He would do that.

By the time I was born, he was Wyandotte County Commissioner. He served until his death in 1962, from 1944 to '62. From the time I was a little boy, he was a county commissioner, but his first job was clerk of the district court. As a little boy, several times a year, we would go to the homes of people in a section of Kansas City, Kansas called Armourdale to a Mexican family who had invited my father and his family to dinner. I grew up loving Mexican food. I had a hard time when it became franchised. The Taco Bell food and that sort of food was not the same as I was used to eating at these family houses. They felt like my father was their contact with government.

In 1951, there was a tremendous flood in Kansas City, and the day of the flood, my dad got a call from the commissioner's office. It was the Army Corps of Engineers. They knew that the dikes were going to break. They had already put out the notice to everyone that you have to leave your homes. Apparently, there was a period in the earliest 20th century Mexico where there was turmoil, corruption in government. People would be told on a trumped-up reason you had to leave your house, and when you came back, you couldn't get into your house.

JM: So, there was a great deal of suspicion.

BR: The people would not leave their house. My dad did not speak Spanish, but they had people, the Army Corps of Engineers had people knocking on the door, telling them, "You have to leave," and they wouldn't leave. So, they asked my father to come with them, and he would go up to the door, and he would tell them, and they would translate, "It's true. You have to leave. You'll be able to get your house back." My dad always talked about how they were driving to the start-up of this bridge—it kind of goes up a hill out of Armourdale—and the water was lapping behind them.

I had memories of politics, but my dad was such a hard worker with So, many hours. I never thought that I was going to want to be involved.

JM: That's the next question I'm supposed to ask you, how did you get involved, but I can already tell this is going to be one of those interviews, "All I had to do was just pull the trigger, and you're just going to take it from there," right?

BR: Well, you had a topic where I was able to do that. We'll see.

JM: I'm confident that we're going to hit a number of those. But you witnessed public service firsthand. Your dad was involved in local politics at the local level, which, of course, is very important.

BR: When I got the bug—because I didn't have it then. I respected my dad, but I didn't have it.

JM: When did you get it?

BR: I was a freshman in college. I had no money. My dad—they were living on a county commissioner's salary.

JM: Where were you in college?

BR: I went to a community college, a two-year Catholic college, I think at the time the only two-year Catholic college in the United States called Donnelly College. It still exists. I'm a proud alumnae of Donnelly. It was directly across the street from my house. All the classes ended at 1:00 because they had nursing school in the afternoon. My classes ended at 1:00. So, I was able to work then in the afternoon. I knew I had to make money over these two years. So, that when I finished my junior and senior year at a four-year school that I would be able to pay the tuition. Tuition at Donnelly was low.

I was living at home, and my dad would come home for lunch. We'd have lunch together at 1:00, and then he would take me in the car and drop me off. It was just a few blocks from the courthouse. He would drop me off at work.

My dad was the type that trusted his children. He set an example. He expected you to follow it. He never chastised us. He would point out things he didn't think were right. This one day in the car, he said, "Listen, I'm arranging a Democrat luncheon for late September, and I got a Speaker, a US senator, and he's going to be very good. I've heard him speak, and he agreed to come to Kansas." He said, "I want you to go." I said okay. He said, "You'll have to tell your last hour's professor that you're going to have to leave. I'm going to pick you up at about 11:30. You may have to tell your last two teachers that you won't be there that day." I said okay. I'm thinking, "I don't want to do this."

That was three weeks in advance. Time passes. It's a few days away, and we're riding to work in the afternoon. He said, "You did tell your teachers that you won't be there on Friday?" and I said, "Actually, Dad, I really appreciate you offering me the chance to go, but I don't really want to go. So, I didn't tell them."

I was nineteen, and for the first time in my life, I saw my dad angry at me. He would correct me but not anger. He said, "You're going. It's not an option. You're going. You tell them tomorrow." I thought, "What is the deal with my dad? He's never spoken to me that way."

So, I tell the two teachers that I have to go to this. We go down. It's at the National Guard Armory on 18th Street in Kansas City, Kansas, just a quarter of a mile north of I-70. When we went in, naturally he knew everyone there. He'd been in politics for thirty years at the time, we're talking. Then somebody up at the podium, on the dais (it was up on a stage) said, "Please take your seats for your lunch."

My dad said, "Listen, let me go here and see if this table here"—he goes over there with me and says, "Is that seat free?" "Yes." "Could my son Bill [sit with you], have you met him before?" It's older people. They're being nice to me. I'm thinking, "This is a nightmare." I'd already scoped the place. I didn't see anybody my age. They were all older people. I said, "Aren't you sitting with me?" He said, "No, I've got to be up at the head table."

So, I sit down, and they're very nice to me. I'm counting the time. I'm looking at the podium. There were people on the podium, some of them I knew their name. They were Democrat colleagues with my dad. Others, I didn't know their name. I couldn't say their name, but I recognized them as local officials.

There were two guys that I didn't recognize. One of them was young and kind of had reddish hair, like almost red hair. In fact, it was red because there was light coming in from the windows at the top of the Armory. When the light was hitting this young guy's head—I knew it wasn't him. He was way too

young to be a US senator. The other guy looked the part. He was very distinguished, rotund, white hair flocked back.

They give a long introduction of this US senator, somebody at the podium, not my dad, and So, we clap. I didn't know what to do, but I saw other people standing. I noticed that the entire place, where all the people were sitting, the guests of honor, they all stood. At one end was the young guy that I discounted him. The other end was the guy with the white hair. So, I'm watching him, and I'm clapping for him.

JM: He's not the guy.

BR: So, he stands up and he starts clapping, and the first couple of claps, I think he's clapping for himself, but he stands at his spot. I'm thinking, "It's not him?" I look over, and it's the young, reddish-colored hair guy. I'm thinking, "My god, he's a senator? He looks twenty-nine."

Well, he gives a speech. The speech is not on politics. The speech is on history. I was mesmerized. He spoke for close to thirty minutes on history. I was mesmerized. When it was over, my dad had told me, "You're going to have to wait around for a while because I've got to help with organizing and talk to the people at the Armory and pay the check and stuff." I said okay.

It ends, and there's a line. I get in the line, and this senator is shaking hands with everybody before they go into this foyer. He's shaking hands, and he just says, "Thanks for coming. Thank you. Thank you." "I enjoyed your speech." "Thank you." They're moving on. I went from being furious that I had to be there to being like a groupie. When I put out my hand to the senator, I'm saying rapid-fire, "I didn't even want to be here. My father made me come. I told him I didn't want to be here. He told me I had to come. They always say listen to what your parents tell you. This was the greatest experience of my life. I'm a freshman in college. I didn't know what I was going to major in. Now I know it's going to be a major in history."

Looking back on it, this was 1958. Sixty-one years later, it's still embarrassing. Three times while I am speaking, his hand relaxes, but my hand didn't relax. I'm still holding on.

JM: What did he say to you in that Boston accent? Am I guessing correctly?

BR: You guessed correctly. I go out into the hallway, into the foyer, and I'm just staring at him like a groupie. I'm staring at him. This tall, thin man with horn-rimmed glasses—I'd never seen horn-rimmed glasses before. He came up to me and he said, "I heard part of your conversation with Senator John Kennedy."

When I was nineteen, I looked sixteen. He said, "I'm sure you're not old enough to vote." You had to be twenty-one then. I said no. He said, "There's people at your college that are old enough to vote." I said yeah. He said, "Give me your address." He copied down my address. I found out later that it was Ted Sorenson.

JM: The speechwriter who wrote that great inaugural speech.

BR: It was Ted Sorenson, and I didn't know that until after Kennedy was elected president twelve months later. Then I saw Sorenson on TV, and I said, "That's the guy."

I got a letter from Kennedy. I'm sure that the letters were from staff, but I got three different letters between that September and the following November, a year, November. They were all like, "Dear Friend," the first two, but the third one was a "Dear Bill Reardon: I enjoyed meeting you at the Kansas National Guard Armory. I hope that you can help me with people that you know at college. You don't

have to be of voting age to be a part of my campaign” and So, on. I treasured that letter. My little brother said, “I want to take it to school tomorrow and show everybody.” I said, “Jack, you're not taking the letter. I'm not even taking it to school. Why would I let you? This is my treasure.” He said, “You're being selfish. I should be allowed to take it. I'm not going to let anything happen to it.” “Somebody will tear it. Somebody will get a stain on it, ink stain. No, you can't do it.”

I'm thinking later, “I have got to hide this.” So, I hide it. I get involved in the campaign. I'm watching it. Kennedy wins, and I'm thinking, “You know, that letter could be worth something.”

JM: And you can't find it?

BR: And I could not find it. I remembered that I hid it, but I couldn't remember where I hid it.

JM: Did you ever find it?

BR: Years later. I'm married and have a family. We were at my mom's house for dinner, and I'd be going through drawers. She'd say, “What are you looking for?” I said, “I'm looking for a letter.” She said, “Did you leave it last Sunday?” “No, it's a letter from 1958.” She said, “Well, I can guarantee you, you're not finding a letter from 1958. That's for sure.”

My most prized possession. There'd be times when I would pine about that. I'm a big Royals fan. About four years ago, I was watching the Royals game. My wife came up from downstairs. She'd been working in our basement. We had boxed stuff up when we had moved here, moved to our house years before. She came upstairs and said, “I've got something to show you.” I said, “At the half inning here. There're two outs. Just a minute.” She said, “I think you want to see this now.”

She had gone through a box. She went away to college. I went across the street to college. We were high school sweethearts. We wrote each other every day. We had this big box of letters, her letters and my letters. She hands me the Kennedy letter. I said, “Where did you find this?” She said, “It was in the middle of our letters.”

JM: That makes sense.

BR: Then I remembered it. I thought, “Jack would never look here.”

JM: How many years later was this?

BR: Well, from '58 to probably 2008, So, fifty years.

JM: I love the way you tell a story because I can anticipate where you're going, but I don't 'want to hurry you. Now you have it now. You know where it is now.

BR: I do. Well, I should say this: My wife knows where it is now. I've entrusted her to it.

So, then I was fired up for the election. From that election on, I was really involved with politics and following politics. In 1970, my brother also became a teacher, not at the same school. We were both social studies teachers. In 1972, at age twenty-nine, he ran for the Register of Deeds of Wyandotte County, and he won. People were saying, “Why didn't you run?” I thought, “You know, maybe I wouldn't mind being in elected office. I've kind of got the bug now, but I don't want to. I love teaching too much.” He was going to have to give up his job. Register of Deeds was a full-time job. I said, “I just can't do that.”

I had replaced him at a summer job. He was managing a pool in Raytown, Missouri, and I had replaced him because he ran for office. I'd done it for two years. My brother is at my house one day with his wife on a Sunday. I get a call. I go in to answer the phone, and it's my boss that owned the pool, telling

me that he needed for me to come over to get ready for six weeks from now when this pool opens. I've got to paint and do some stuff.

I didn't want to do it. I didn't like the job. I didn't want to do it. But I would never say, "No, I'm not going to work this summer." I had to work. I had to do something. So, I said, "No, I can't do it," and he said, "Why not? You said you could last year. You said you wanted to work again." I said, "I know, but I can't do it." He said, "Why?" I didn't even have an answer. I just had read in the paper that Jack Steineger, the Kansas state senator from Wyandotte County, had been chosen by the Democrat candidate for governor, the district attorney in Wichita. I'm trying to think of his name.

JM: What year would this have been?

BR: '74.

JM: It was Vern Miller.

BR: Vern Miller. Vern Miller had picked Jack Steineger. I'd read in the paper that Jack Steineger had been chosen to be his lieutenant governor running mate. I thought, "His seat's open." I said, "I'm running for the"—he said, "I hate to lose you, but I understand."

So, I get off the phone. It was like an out-of-body experience. I walk into the rec room. My wife is there, my brother, his wife. Kind of nonchalantly, my brother said, "Who was that?" I said, "John Hughes." He said, "Is he going to hire you again this year?" I said, "Well, he offered it to me, but I turned it down." He said, "You turned him down? What are you going to do?" I said, "I'm running for the Kansas Senate."

I will never forget the look on my wife's face. I had never once said that I was going to do this, that I wanted to do this. It was almost like this is the way out of having to go to the pool.

JM: But you must have been ruminating on it subconsciously.

BR: Subconsciously or something. My wife is just stunned. She wasn't mad, but she was just disappointed that we were close, and she couldn't believe that there would be something like this, and I wouldn't have at least broached her about it, but she was supportive.

My brother said, "I'm getting the maps. We'll see where that district is." Now remember, we're both social studies teachers. We come from a political family. He said, "I'll see where the district is. I know that you're in his district, and I'll get the maps, and we'll start plotting. I'll get them tomorrow at the Register [of] Deeds office. I'll get the maps."

He comes home, he comes in, and he says, "I have something to tell you. You're running for the Kansas legislature, but you're not running for the Senate." I said, "I'm not?" He said, "No, Steineger has a four-year term. This is the two-year mark. That's why he agreed to run for lieutenant governor. His seat's safe." He said, "His seat's not open. It's not even up for election this year." He said, "But your state representative, do you know his name?" I said no. So, he tells me this doctor's name. "He's announced that he's retiring. He's not running again. That's who you're running for." I said, "Oh, okay."

I went into the legislature in 1975. In 1975, the talk was my brother ran for mayor in '75. In '72, he was elected Register of Deeds, and then he ran for mayor, and he was elected in the spring of 1975. There was this rumor, "They've got this thing all planned out. It's a three-step process. Jack Reardon is running for Register of Deeds. Then Bill Reardon was running for the legislature. After he got elected, Jack Reardon was running for mayor."

Now that you know the real story, there was no plan. I didn't even know when I got on the phone that day that I was running.

JM: It's a little bit like you were trying to construct a Kennedy-like dynasty in Wyandotte County.

BR: That's what they kept comparing us to, and I kept thinking, "Jack, this is nuts." He said, "We're not the ones saying it. We'll never say it. Let them say it." I said, "I don't think so. I think we should say, 'We don't want to hear that. We're Kennedy fans, but'"—So, we did get some of that early on.

JM: It was somewhat of an accidental decision. You ran for the legislature, and you proceeded to serve for thirty years.

BR: I served for thirty years. Fate's a strange thing.

JM: And you could continue teaching.

BR: And I was able to continue teaching.

JM: It's a citizen legislature, which means you have to have—

BR: Another job.

JM: Over all the years you were here, legislative pay was debated off and on for years, but being a legislator doesn't pay all that much.

BR: That's right. And Kansas was one of the lowest paid in the country and still is one of the lowest in the country.

JM: You taught social studies and served in the legislature. Would it be fair to say that much of your focus in that time was on education?

BR: When I went to the legislature, you could put down requests. Some other legislators from Wyandotte County that had served for a long time said, "I don't think they're going to put you on the Education Committee your first year," So, I didn't write it down as a request. At the end of the first year, the minority leader in the Kansas House named Pete Loux, he was a CPA from Wichita.

JM: He later served on the State Corporation Commission.

BR: He was appointed by Governor [Robert] Bennett to be on the Kansas Corporation Commission. There was a vacancy. We needed to have an election to elect a new minority leader. John Carlin was elected. After the election, he called me and said that he was on the Education Committee, but now that he was going to be the minority leader, he wouldn't be on any committees. He said, "Would you like to be on that?" I said yes. It was going to be one year, the second year of his two-year stint on the Education Committee. He said, "Okay, just plan on it." I told my wife, "I've been commuting, but if I'm going to be on the Education Committee," it met at 3 PM then, and it sometimes went to 6, 7, 7:30 at night. I thought, "I'm going to have to find a place to stay up there."

Over the summer, I kept calling John Carlin's office and talking to staff and saying, "I need to find out. If I'm going to be on the committee, I need to make arrangements for some place to live." They kept saying, "We still haven't heard. We turned your name in weeks and weeks ago."

It gets to be November. I say, "I have to know."

JM: Because the minority leader can say, "This is my slate."

BR: He told them that.

JM: It's the Speaker who ultimately makes the decision.

BR: And normally if you pick the person, it had to be a Democrat because a Democrat was leaving the committee. So, by rule, it had to be a Democrat. It was the minority leader's choice, So, 99 percent of the time it's going to happen.

Carlin's administrative aide says, "The Speaker is in town today." This is November. It's not during the session. He says, "I'm going over and asking him today, confirm this, and I'll call you back." It's about thirty, thirty-five minutes, and he calls back. I said, "Well, do you have an answer?" He said, "Yeah, and the answer was no." I said, "No?" He said, "No." I said, "I don't even think he would know me if he saw me. What would he have against me? It's Carlin's choice, unless he had some personal reason." I said, "Did you ask him?" He said, "Yes, I did ask him." He said the Speaker said, "We've got just the right amount of teachers on our Education Committee as it is." It was a nineteen-member committee, and I'm thinking, "Wait a minute. I'm not on the committee, but I know who's on the committee. There's only one teacher on the committee, and he's a community college teacher, Jim Maag."

JM: And he was a Republican.

BR: Ron Smith was the administrative aide, and he was a Republican. Ron Smith said, "But there's only one on the committee." He said, "Right." I said, "I don't get it." He said, "Just what you said, Jim. That's just the right amount, no more than one."

JM: Who was the Speaker at the time?

BR: Peter McGill.

JM: From Winfield.

BR: I was not allowed to be on that year. The following year, we gained the majority in the House. I'm on the committee. After one year on the committee, the Democrat chairman of the committee, Roger Robertson from Hutchinson has a born again experience, retires from his job in Hutchinson, retires from the legislature even though he was a dynamic chairman of the Education Committee and moves to the Baptist theological seminary in my legislative district in Kansas City, Kansas to study to become a minister. He just left.

A year after I was told that one teacher is plenty, we're not going to have two on the Education Committee, I was chairman of the committee.

JM: You can't make this stuff up. These are good stories.

BR: Isn't that amazing? One year after I was told that I couldn't be on the committee, I was chairman of the committee.

JM: Pretty early in your career, too. You were chair of one of the major committees.

BR: Right. There was a real challenge for me. The year before that, I had been chairman of Federal and State. That was a difficult chair. They had a lot of high-profile, controversial issues.

JM: That's where big federal and state issues go. In fact, you said before we started the interview that your first year there as the chair, there was a very tense hearing on the Equal Rights Amendment.



BR: To rescind the Equal Rights [Amendment].

JM: Tell me about that. That was in 1977.

BR: '77.

JM: Kansas was one of the early adopters of the ERA.

BR: We were the fourth. Former representative Joan Wagon told me that. I knew we were one of the first, and she knew exactly. It was the fourth.

JM: Of course, she did. We were the fourth state to adopt. All the states had not adopted yet to ratify it.

BR: They didn't have the three-fourths, which is a high mark. You have to have three-fourths of the states to ratify it.

JM: So, they extended the amount of time for ratification. In the meantime, there were people here in Kansas who wanted to rescind the state's support of it.

BR: Yes.

JM: So, that's what the hearing was about?

BR: That's what the hearing [was for]. We had to try to make it fair. There were a thousand people here. The room held about 150 or 200. We put extra chairs. The room held 200.

JM: Was it in the old Supreme Court chamber where you had the hearing?

BR: It was in what was [room]519 many years ago and is now the Senate Ways and Means [committee room], in that area. We stood outside, and those who were supporting rescinding [Kansas's vote approving the ERA] and opposed to rescinding got in separate lines. We had the exact same number of chairs on each side for the aisle. We had the same number of people that were in there.

Outside, a very small percentage of those who had come—

JM: Got in.

BR: They were out there in the hall, and the fire marshal came and said, "This is a fire hazard to have this many people cramming up on this floor." He made many of them leave.

It was a controversial hearing. I had a number of people contact my office who were fearful that if an equal rights amendment for women went into effect that they would be forced to have a job. They had been told they would have to go to work. It was women who said, "I made the choice to stay home. My husband and I made that choice that I will stay home."

JM: They thought that the passage of the ERA would compel them to—

BR: They were convinced.

JM: The opponents of this thing, Phyllis Schlafly, that was one of the talking points from the opponents out there is that you don't want this to pass because you will be compelled to go to work, regardless of whether or not you want to.

BR: It was difficult for me. I wasn't about to say, "I understand. I won't do it." I said, "I'm going to listen." I said, "I have a wife and three daughters. I certainly want them to have equal rights."

Another example, you mentioned the one about the thing that they would have to work. Another one, she was inconsolable in my office, because she was convinced that her first grade daughter was going to have to go in the bathroom at the same time as other first grade boys in her class to use the bathroom, that you would be required to have unisex public toilet facilities. None of that was true, but that doesn't change the fact that they believed it and was fearful for their family's sake.

JM: That's a lot of pressure on you as the chair of a committee that early on.

BR: Early on. I didn't have the same experiences that my brother had. He was a teacher, but my brother did not coach. My brother went to graduate school only in the summer. My day for five years was to teach until 3, coach until 6, football and basketball, and go to graduate school until 9. I remember years later—I'm much younger than I am now. In my fifties, I remember thinking, "How did I do that?" my wife would keep our three daughters up. They would sleep until 10:30 or 11:00 because otherwise if I didn't get home until 9:30 or 10:00, I would only see them on weekends.

The reason I bring that up is that I was on no boards. I was in no clubs or associations. I didn't know anything about Robert's Rules or how you run a meeting. My brother knew a little bit about that before he ran for Register of Deeds. So, you add to that that in my third year, I was chairman of the committee, yes, there was a learning curve there.

JM: You had that experience. Then you were chair of the education committee. That was so much during your tenure at the State House. We went back and forth on education. School financials are still a huge issue in this state. You were right in the middle of a lot of those debates.

BR: Right in the middle. I was chairman. I'd been chairman of the Fed and State for a year before I moved over to that. I knew a little bit more. What I found out was that on the Education Committee—and this speaks volumes on how the Kansas legislature has changed—it was confrontational. The confrontation was not party based. The confrontation was oftentimes regional, urban versus rural. Suburban versus farm people. It was more that. It wasn't so much Democrat versus Republican, and I thought that was just a factor that was unique to the Committee of Education. Certainly it's not like, well, one party's for education, the other party isn't. Everybody has to be for education, but that's kind of how it was then.

As time passed, there were clearly differences on this side of the aisle and on this other side of the aisle, but there were ways to work. Of my thirty years in the legislature, twenty-six of them, I was on the Education Committee. If you take my job, my career and divide it kind of in half—this is roughly speaking—the fifteen years are totally different, not just for me, but for this body than my second fifteen.

The first fifteen was strategy of choice, find ways to compromise. So, it's bipartisan. Of my thirty years, twenty-six were spent in the minority. But the last fifteen years, there was very little of this, "Let's cooperate."

JM: Roughly speaking, the line of demarcation there would be roughly early nineties.

BR: Early nineties.

JM: What changed then? Are you talking about the spirit of the legislature. The collegiality of the place was you had problems to solve, let's do it. Let's figure out a way to do it.

BR: And there were reasons. It was kind of symbiotic in the sense that sometimes—I mean the four times I was in leadership, we were in the majority. But when we were in the minority, most of my time obviously—twenty-six of the thirty years, I was in the minority. Let's say there was an education bill

that was going to benefit most of the state but rural legislators were suspicious of it because their people were suspicious of it, that it was going to take things in the future away from them. That was what they had in their mind.

JM: Lead them down the path of forced consolidation or something?

BR: Right. That's one of their greatest fears, that they were going to get to the point where they had to consolidate, give up their district, bus the kids to the town closest to them. So, what a Republican speaker might do, this is just a hypothetical, would be to say, "We have to have"—one of the differences is that they wanted an opportunity to be able to let some of their people off, and it was a pretty close—

JM: Let them vote against it.

BR: Most of my early career, they were in the majority, but not by much. If they could work with us and say, "What would you like to be put in this bill or a separate bill? We'll run them back to back. What would you like in the bill that would allow us to let a few of our rural members be able to vote no, and we'll still have enough votes to pass it because you're going to vote yes because we're giving you something."

We did that when we were in the majority occasionally. The latter part of my service here, I lobbied for ten years for the Kansas City Kansas school district, I didn't see much of that at all.

JM: That tells a lot about the design of the legislative process, in the sense that we want to have fairly drawn districts, competitive elections, So, that one side doesn't dominate the other so much. That requires that kind of consensus deal making, if you have that situation. We need you to pass the bill. Just the transparency to come to you, the Republican leaders, to come to you and say, "We don't have enough votes on our own to pass this thing. We need to work together." This place really worked then.

BR: Right. And like I say, in some cases, they had the votes if they were willing to twist arms.

JM: Right, but they were trying to protect some of their members.

BR: Protect some of their members.

JM: Yes. So, it was a very transparent conversation between the two sides.

BR: I just thought that that's how it always had worked and always would work. I look back now. I think that was a pretty efficient way to do it.

JM: They probably got a lot of very good compromise legislation.

BR: It wasn't exactly what we want. Maybe it was more beneficial to us as the minority because we were getting something. The majority might say, "Yes, but we had to give them something. I wish we had a larger number." When you're saying, "Why isn't it like that now?" for the last decade or so, it's been pretty lopsided. It's been veto-proof majorities. They don't really need to try to work with the other side of the aisle.

JM: There is a line in recent Kansas history where the place became more partisan for lots of different reasons.

BR: Lots of different reasons.

JM: And you straddled that line in terms of your service.

BR: Yes.

JM: What was it like then in the second half of your career in trying to get things done? Give me an example of how things were different.

BR: Let me just segue into that, talk about the education, the school finance bill in 1990. When we were elected in '90, can you indulge me one more time about a story?<sup>1</sup>

JM: Of course. Let me just sit back and get comfortable.

BR: For about ten years, I taught a graduate course for KU on the Kansas legislature. I'd been a teacher a long time. I had some teaching skills, but I had also been in the legislature a long time. I did that for about ten years until the recession in 2008. I did it past even when I was in the legislature. I retired in 2005.

We got elected. We knew we were going to have to do something because the gap in the mill levies was just unreal, from 150 mills to 200 mills in some places in southeast Kansas to 8 mills in Burlington where the power plant was. They could raise as much money only charging eight mills as it took 170 or 200 mills in southeast Kansas.

JM: Let's set the stage for that. The Democrats were in the majority for a brief time. You came in, knowing you wanted to fix this problem.

BR: We wanted to fix it, yes.

JM: The problem you were trying to solve was this disequal situation where "poorer school districts" had to really tax their people in order to get the money to fund their schools whereas the richer districts could tax them at a much lower point and still raise the same amount of money.

BR: Exactly. That's exactly right. One of the things we wanted to do was to standardize the mill levy. Whether you're a rich district, a poor district, everyone will pay for the same number of mills. There will be a cap on what you can spend. Twenty mills is what it became. It started out as ten<sup>2</sup> and raised to twenty. What your twenty mills will raise, and you're allowed to raise this much. Twenty mills pays this much, and then the remainder the state pays.

JM: Drawing money from all over the place.

BR: Drawing money from everywhere.

JM: In other words, wealthier school districts through that system were subsidizing the poorer ones.

BR: And they didn't like that.

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<sup>1</sup> The election occurred in November 1990 when the Democrats won the majority in the House. The session convened in 1991 with Reardon as chair of the Education committee. It was the 1992 session, however, when the historic school finance bill that is the subject of this story was passed. Other oral histories from this series provide additional insights into the politics of school finance reform. See Robin Jennison, Marvin Barkis.

<sup>2</sup> Proposed mill levy started high, was lowered in floor debate to 35 mills. Then in a subsequent legislative session, Rep. Reardon offered an amendment to lower it to 20 mills where it remains.

JM: Of course not.

BR: It's understandable. We would meet... Marvin Barkis was Speaker. I was Speaker Pro Tem...we would meet during that session almost daily. When everyone had finished with their committee hearings, we would meet in the Speaker's office. We would meet with Dale Dennis, who was the Assistant Commissioner of the Department of Education.

JM: Essentially a state legend.

BR: A state legend as a school finance expert. He would be in there every day. We'd come up with something and say, "Can you do the runs on this?" He would go back, work through the night, come back with the runs the next day.

JM: By "runs," they literally would be these pages and pages of computer print-outs that would show you how each district would fare under this tweak to the formula or that tweak.

BR: All 305, at that time 305, but 285[current number of school districts].

JM: Every legislator would sit here and say, "Where's my district?"

BR: We'd find your district, know your district number, and find it and see how you'd do. Then we would compare it with the current amount. Two groups of legislators and their districts were adversely affected as we worked on this. The goal was to dramatically lower down to twenty mills, everyone's mill levy for schools. That was going to cost money. That reduction would be paid for by increasing income tax and sales tax. Those two increases would cover that.

JM: Was it twenty mills or thirty-five? Where did the thirty-five come in?

BR: Thirty-five actually was first. Then it dropped to twenty. It was thirty-five mills at first, you're right.

JM: You're getting corrected by the gallery here.

BR: Yes, the gallery. It was a little less.

JM: The point is, regardless of the number, you wanted to standardize.

BR: Standardize. Everyone be paying the same mill levy. Two major issues developed. One of the issues was that the small districts under the old formula, they got more money because they were small, economy of scale. They were So, small. Their costs were higher. They were getting more. But now they were going to get the same number of mills from the state, and their costs were going to be higher. So, that was something that really bothered them. They were fearful they were going to lose ground from where they were.

JM: Then you had to figure out how to weight the formula.

BR: Yes. The wealthy districts led by Johnson County were concerned because they didn't think that they were going to have enough money. They were spending more than what the formula was going to allow them now.

JM: You had capped that.

BR: We can't have these two groups against us. That's over half of the legislature that represents those kinds of districts. We've got to do something. What we came up with, meeting after meeting, with the help of Dale offering suggestions, we came up with at-risk funding. I had gotten a print-out one day that shows that Kansas City, Kansas was going to be getting less money under this new formula than we were getting right now. I thought, "Oh, my god." They know that I'm on this little small group making this decision.

JM: Right. You can't let that happen.

BR: Dale Dennis always talks about how he saw me slump down into my desk when I saw the results. Dale Dennis said, "I want to tell you about what some states around the country are doing. Some states around the country are putting into their formula a concept which says that based on the percentage of people you have that are at risk of failing, if they're designated at risk of failing"—and the biggest measure is poverty. If they're in poverty, they're at risk. That's the biggest factor.

Every state is eligible to get at-risk funding, but the amount that you get will be based on how many kids that you have that fit the category of being at risk. Well, an urban core district like Kansas City, Kansas would have a lot that fit that category. Johnson County wouldn't have many. They'd have fewer. I said to Dale Dennis after the meeting, "That doesn't solve our rural people. What are they getting? We're getting something because we have poor kids." Dale said—this is a city boy that lived in Kansas City, Kansas his whole life, knew nothing about rural life.

JM: Meaning you.

BR: Me, nothing about rural life. He said, "You've got high percentages of people who will qualify as at risk in rural areas." I did not know that. Of course, they knew what their district looked like. They were for it. The districts were for it, but Johnson County was really upset. What we came up to, which was supposed to be a temporary fix—

JM: The LOB? [Local Option Budget]

BR: A two- or three-year local option budget where, if you're willing to pay for it yourself, you can add money on over and above what we've set the cap for spending. You can exceed the cap. It started out at just a few percent. As you know, it's grown every year. It's now up to 25 or 30 percent, 30 percent I think now, since I left in 2015, when it was 25.

JM: So, the local option budget—

BR: That was Johnson County. What changed is that it was supposed to be just until the amount of money that the formula was generating got them up to where they had been previously. When you got to where your district was before the new formula, from then on, you're on—but politically, when it got to that point, it never sent.

JM: That's one of the truisms of politics. Don't create something that you don't want to live with forever.

BR: That's exactly right.

JM: You were right in the middle of that. That was momentous. That was a big change in the way that schools were financed that happened during those years, right?

BR: Yes.

JM: It's been tweaked and changed and debated ever since, right up through these court cases.

BR: The formula went in in '92. We had problems. That was some of our problems. We had problems with Governor Finney. Governor Finney was a type of Democrat populist. She had said, "You guys do whatever you want with the funding." She wasn't really a policy wonk. She was a people person, and she was good at it. But she said, "There's only one thing. Don't raise the sales tax, or I'll veto it."

We knew she said that, but the thing was, if we're going to lower the property tax, which poll after poll, decade after decade, the least popular tax in Kansas.

JM: You had to replace that revenue with something.

BR: It was a three-stooled chair<sup>3</sup>—property, sales, and income. If you take one off of the table, sales tax, and you lower property tax, the entire thing is going to be on income tax. So, we had to have these other two with a little bit, the twenty mills, from the property tax. So, we thought, "She'll go along with it." In 1991, we passed the bill, and she vetoes it.

JM: How about that? All that work.

BR: Yes. So, we came back the next year. She had a lot of education people mad. When she came back next year, she compromised slightly. She said that we had to have—the sales tax could not go above this percent. We had to keep it at that, move the income tax up slightly, get a few dollars less. We were going to have less money to work with, but we had to get it signed. So, it was kind of a historic period.

I want to change subjects for a minute and tell you about the course that I taught at KU. These were adults. To be able to be a part of this program, you had to working for a public entity in Kansas. You had a lot of state employees, county employees, city employees, not as many school district employees because it was during the school year. They're working.

My job was that I would teach for one full day to four different locations in the state. I would teach an eight-hour course, eight-hour day. I would give a little background to myself, and I told them, "You know that this has been a historically Republican state. I'm a Democrat, but it's a Republican state. It's not entirely Republican. The Democrats had control of the House three different times, the 1912 election, 1976 election, and the 1990 election."

JM: Three out of hundred and something. That's not a very good [track record].

BR: That's right. Three out of 150. This guy raised his hand. I called on him. I had said parenthetically, "You know, I am so old, I served on two of the three, come to think of it."

JM: Not the 1912.

BR: I said, "I served on two of the three." So, this guy raised his hand, "Which two?" I said, "Which two what?" He said, "Which two did you serve on? Which two terms did you serve on?" I said, "You weren't listening because if you had been listening, you would have heard me say 1912, 1976, and 1990. It's pretty obvious." "Well, if it's obvious, tell me."

Look, I've been a teacher for forty years. I'm expecting him to high five the guy sitting next to me for jabbing me about being old. There was no defense. I am old. But he never lost eye contact. He never smiled. He is waiting for an answer. And I said, "Do you recall a few hours ago when I was first talking about the course and what it would be like? I said it would not be graded. What did I say after that?"

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<sup>3</sup> Three-legged Stool

He said, “You said it wouldn't be graded. It would be Pass/Fail.” I said, “That's right. It's not graded, but it's Pass/Fail. Are you sure you don't want to restate that question or admit that you know the answer?”

One of my goals was, this is not my class where I have to keep kids in control. This isn't teenagers.

JM: These are adults.

BR: Jim, I succeeded way too much. The guy was so comfortable in my class, he was willing to put the knife in there and twist.

JM: I'm intrigued by what you said, the first fifteen years of your career and the second fifteen years, and how dramatically things changed.

BR: I'll go into that a little bit.

JM: I do want you to talk about that. I think it has some bearing on issues that we're still dealing with.

BR: Right. January of 1975, it was early in the session, I don't remember what the bill was. I remember their faces, but I couldn't tell you the names of these two House members. They were both Republican. They're at the mic, and they are going at each other. It is ferocious. I don't remember if I had a side. I'm not even sure if I understood the issue. I was just amazed when I found out they were both Republican, and they were really—nothing disrespectful but forceful, and “You're wrong on that, and here's why.” They would be going at it. It was like a twenty-minute debate between the two of them. The bill eventually passed on general orders. It was going to be held over for the final vote the next day.

I go out. I'm looking for one of the legislators that we had talked about going to lunch together. I see the two guys who had been at the mic, saying, “Okay, now yesterday you got to choose. So, today we're going to so and so's restaurant.” “That's all right. That's fair,” and they're laughing and talking. I'm thinking, “I cannot believe this.” I never thought that what they were doing was fake. What I thought was they had very strong feelings on this issue. They're not afraid to contradict a colleague, but it's not just a colleague. It's a personal friend.

I remember thinking, if I told a teacher across the hall from me, if I said to a teacher, “I can hear your teaching, and I know you really work hard and that you're prepared, but you're not getting to these kids, and I can tell from what I hear, and I can tell when they come to my class for my class.” That teacher would never talk to me again. That was my feeling. That never happened to me, but I would never say that to another teacher, disagree. I thought, “This is liberating. You can express yourself here, and as long as you do it in a way that's not demeaning, you can be at odds and still be friends with a person, still like a person.”

The latter years that I was here, I didn't see much of that. I didn't see much of that where you could, if you were critical of somebody, you made an enemy. It was more in the caliber of what I would suspect would happen to me if I had done that to a teacher.

JM: What triggered the change? What happened?

BR: I think ideology started playing a bigger role. It's not like, “Okay, that's your view, but I've got a different one.” It's like, “You are disloyal to the Party. You are disloyal”—

JM: To the cause.

BR: To the cause if you don't toe the line. I'm not saying it was all just in the other party. I think whether our party was just reacting to what they saw on the other side or what. I think both parties became more entrenched.



JM: You were here as a lobbyist for some of the period, lobbying for the Kansas City school district.

BR: I retired in 2005. That was my last session. Then I lobbied for ten years for the Kansas City, Kansas school district. Denny Apt, a former legislator, former education chairman, we had a lot of common. She was lobbying for the Kansas City district, but she retired at the end of the '04 session.

JM: The reason I asked about that is because then that partisanship got more pronounced.

BR: Right.

JM: You were lobbying during that period. I can remember even from my perspective, showing up here in the early eighties as a reporter and covering the legislature through the present time. The differences, this place just became a very different place, a lot less collegial, a lot less friendly, all businesslike. Ideology took over. You saw that both early on as a legislator but then again as a lobbyist.

BR: I think part of it is just in sheer numbers. I think part of it is numbers. If you've got—there's 125 in the House. If you've got 85—

JM: You said that earlier. You don't need to deal with the other side.

BR: You don't really need to deal. If you've got 85 and the Senate's got 32 out of 40, and you've got a governor in your party, the incentive is gone to feel like you have to—

JM: But there's kind of a cause and effect thing here, chicken and egg question. When former governor Sam Brownback was governor, he was elected in 2010, but in 2012, he decided there were too many moderate Republicans in the Kansas Senate, and he led an effort to take them out and did.

BR: Right.

JM: He strengthened the Republican majority, but also strengthened his ideological hand. I'm not sure we'd ever seen that in state history until that time.

BR: No, and look what's happened since then, where you've had some Republicans, specifically from Johnson County, some Republican legislators that have switched parties.

JM: The place feels a little bit more like its old self to me recently.

BR: Right. I think a contrast between that where they just felt like those legislators that, the three of them that switched just after this 2018 election, they just felt they needed to change parties because prior to that time, they could vote their conscience, and it would be okay. Even though their votes couldn't stop them from doing what they want, they were pariahs because of that fact. Contrast that with me as Chairman of Education, which has nothing to do with the issue I'm going to bring up, but assistant Minority Leader, Speaker Pro Tem. I was in leadership. In fact, I was in leadership for eighteen years.

I was elected to leadership nine times when my caucus knew that I was a pro-life Catholic Democrat legislator. I'm gone from the process now, but I wonder if a pro-life Catholic could be in leadership. I don't know.

JM: That's to your point that the ideological purity plays out on both sides of the aisle.

BR: I didn't want to make it sound like I was only casting aspersions on one party.

JM: It's important to do that. Your point is that people knew that about you, knew what your position was, and even thought it might have been a minority position in the caucus, they still had faith in you as a leader.

BR: Yes. I don't know if that can happen now.

JM: If that can't happen now, how does that diminish the process? How does that affect the way the place works?

BR: You know, I found myself doing the Kum-ba-yas a year and a half ago, watching John McCain talking about Obama care, and the fact that we need to have regular order, which means it needs to go through the normal process.

JM: Committee hearings and the like.

BR: Committee hearings and that sort of thing and try to work out a compromise. I kept thinking, "John, we're both living in a time that's different." In other words, it's not just Kansas. I don't know what it's like in other state legislatures, but I see parallels between what's happening in Washington with what's happening now here.

JM: I know a lot of people in a shorthand way will say what has happened in Washington politics has descended upon state capitols all over the country.

BR: That's probably some truth to that.

JM: This has really been great, but you can with some notes to some lighthearted stories, things that happened when you were here.

BR: I'm just going to mention one. This one's very short, uncharacteristic for me. There was a man that was here that was a state senator from Wyandotte County. I'd not met him until I came here. His name was George Bell. He was in his early seventies when I came here. He had been a teacher. He had been county superintendent. Seventy years ago, we had county superintendent. He was Wyandotte County's superintendent of schools.

I think the teacher in him, I was young. He was old.

JM: Did he mentor you?

BR: He mentored me a little, even though he wasn't in the House. He was in the Senate. One of the things he told me I'll never forget, I was saying, "I don't know if I can ever really get a bill passed." I said, "We're in the minority. Did you ever get bills passed when you're in the minority?" He said, "You know what? Not many people can in the minority party, but far more could if they would ascribe to what I learned to ascribe to because an older man told me this. So, I'm telling it to you. You can get bills passed even when you're in the minority if you're willing to not take credit. If you're willing to not take credit, the majority party will let the minority party do more than they normally would."

That was in my first month of being in the legislature. Over those thirty years, there was innumerable times where I was saying to myself, "George, you know what you were talking about."

JM: Did you use that advice?

BR: What things I did get accomplished, it was a collaborative effort. It was a bunch of us cosponsoring a bill. It was a bill where I thought where I made some concessions, I can get Republicans on it, but never like Reardon's bill. He was right. I have ego, too. I would have liked to have had it, but what I became aware of, wouldn't it be nice to have your name once in a while? Yeah,

but if you take that approach, you'll never have your name. So, what's the difference? You might as well get the bill passed.

JM: I'm glad you brought that up. It comes down to a very fundamental question about why people choose to serve here in the first place. Do they come here to get something done for their community? Whatever you define that community as the state, as their county, as their town. Or do they come here to make a name and a way to propel them to higher office? I think it comes to motivation.

BR: And then there's someone like me who came So, he wouldn't have to go work at the pool. [laughs]

JM: And thirty years later, looking back.

BR: I was going to tell you something else that I found that I had never really thought about, but once we were in the majority the second time, when I was Speaker Pro Tem.

JM: The first time being 1912.

BR: Yes, the first time being 1912. Thanks a lot, Jim. I've lost my train of thought. Oh, why teachers can be motivating. When we got the majority in the 1990 election, there was 125 in the House. We had 63. The Republicans had 62. It was the slimmest majority you could have. We had a young guy in his first term from Wyandotte County who ran as a Democrat, and he voted with us on all the bills that were noncontroversial. Most people don't realize, most of the bills, it's 115-2, 123-0, or 125-0 if everyone's here.

If there was anything controversial or close, he always voted for the Republicans. So, we went in knowing we were one down. We weren't one up. We were one down. Marvin Barkis, who was Speaker, was great at working the desks in this Chamber. He could work those desks. He told me early on, he said, "You're going to have to be in the chair every day." I said, "I'd like to be in the chair some of the time, but you're the Speaker. You need to be in the chair." He said, "No, I'm going to have to be out there. I'm going to have to be working it all the time." So, he didn't do it very often, very rarely he would do it. The teacher in me, I liked it, yes. I felt like this was something I'm used to. I'm the teacher.

I was in the chair a lot. We have the thing where it's Call of the House, where they want to force everyone to vote.

JM: It's a close vote, and one side thinks it can—

BR: One side is losing. They have a Call of the House to make everyone vote.

JM: And they shut the doors, and nobody can come in or out.

BR: Nobody can come in or out.

JM: If somebody's not here, they have to go find them.

BR: They have to go find them. In fact, if they're not in the building, the Highway Patrol goes to find them.

JM: There have been a couple of famous incidents, people brought up in out of their hospital beds to vote.

BR: You can't not only leave the room. You can stand up to stretch, but you can't leave where you're sitting. That's the rule.

JM: They've liberalized that a little bit, but go ahead.

BR: They have?

JM: A little bit.

BR: You had to stay where you are. I'm in the chair, and when this happened, somebody did a Call of the House. We take a vote on the Call of the House. It passes. I instruct the clerks to lock the doors.

JM: Members will be in their seats.

BR: Members will be in their seats. I would make the announcement. Sometimes it was just a matter of a few minutes. Other times, it could be literally hours. You'd have people raising their hand to be recognized. I would recognize them. They said, "Can I be excused to use the restroom?" That's what you do, obviously. I would excuse them.

I'm used to being a teacher, when the kids do what I tell them to do. I didn't have discipline problems. It's not like I had to be a tough guy. That's just the way it worked when I was teaching at a private school. Maybe I had a dream job. I don't know. I'm used to having people under me do what they're told. They would be excused. They would go outside, and they would never come back in. They'd find out it was going to be an hour or two, they just wouldn't come in.

I'm thinking, "I'm not putting up with this." I tried a couple of different scenarios. One scenario was when they finally did come back in, I just made it a point to say, "I just want you to know you better hope that you have been to the restroom before we go into the next Call of the House because I'm never letting you go again."

JM: Would you tell them that private?

BR: Privately. Then someone said, "You know, I don't think you can do that. I don't think you can tell somebody they can't go to the bathroom if they really have to go." I got thinking, "Yeah, if I did that at school, parents would be all over me." So, I came back with a different one. My new one was that I would send a staff member—somebody would say, "Can I be excused?" "No, you can't because Representative so and so is not back. When Representative so and so is back, you can go."

I would have the staff go in and tell the person that's hanging out, "Go find him. Tell him that so and so really has to go to the bathroom, and the Speaker Pro Tem won't let him go until you get back." That worked better. Now the onus was on them. They're going to have somebody mad at them. I thought, "Being a teacher helps me with this job. I never thought it would, but this is a good thing to have."

JM: So, going way back in our conversation when you were named a chair of a committee and didn't really know what you were doing because you didn't know Robert's Rules of Order, but you learned a lot over this thirty years. You learned how to control this body and get it through a Call of the House.

BR: Yes. I wasn't too smart, but I learned. I'll tell you one more real quick one. When I was in the chair, I was not in the chair. This was now when we were in the majority. We were in the minority. I was the assistant minority leader. My job was to make sure when a vote goes up that all of our members are there and voting and that sort of thing.

We had this one member, a good legislator sitting in the back. I don't know if he had a rough night or what, but I noticed earlier that he was sleeping. I thought, "Well, nothing major is happening." Then a vote is up. I looked back, and he's sleeping. I'm thinking, "A week before, a good friend of mine who was in politics from Wyandotte County who was the head of the Kansas Highway Patrol and he was a jokester. He had been a barber. He was an Irish guy. We're both Irish. We had been friends for years. He came up to my desk. He had full access to the Chamber because he was director of the Highway Patrol.

He said, “Reardon, I've heard that you're not doing a very good job keeping the caucus in line and getting them ready for votes and making sure they vote. Some of them missed votes, and you didn't notice it.” He said, “Here's what I brought you.” He had a bullhorn, an electric-charged bullhorn. I'm laughing, and I put it under my desk.

That day when I saw—he missed a vote, this guy in the back, a legislator. I said, “Next time, I'm going to use the bullhorn.” Unlike now, we had covers under our floor, hard, thick, plastic. I had it sitting under there. It had been sitting there for a week.

JM: Sitting on your desk here on the floor.

BR: On the floor right over there. So, I picked it up and just bent down. I didn't want people to see me holding it. So, I bent down and in kind of a deep authoritarian voice, I said, “Representative”—I said his name—“Representative vote.” I could not believe how loud it was. It actually scared me, it was So, loud. I turned to see if anyone noticed. I knew they had to.

JM: Of course.

BR: Every single person was looking up. It had bounced off of that very hard mat. It had bounced up, and it sounded like it was coming from the ceiling, like God or something was talking. I started looking, and they're all still looking. They can't figure it out. Every single legislator was looking up except me and the representative that was still asleep. He didn't hear it.

The epilogue to the story is, about a week later—

JM: You got in trouble, and the Speaker made you give him the bullhorn.

BR: I got in trouble, and the Speaker made me give him the bullhorn.

JM: Speaker Mike Hayden who became governor later.

BR: All of a sudden at my desk is Burt Cantwell, and he's saying, “Hey, listen, I need my bullhorn back.” I said, “I don't have it.” He said, “What do you mean, you don't have it?” I said, “I used it like you told me to, and I got in trouble, and the Speaker took it away from me. I had to go to the principal's office.” He said, “Go in there and tell him I want it back.” I said, “I can tell you, he is so mad at me. He is not giving it back. You're going to have to go in and get it.”

So, Cantwell had to go in and tell the speaker that my bullhorn was actually his bullhorn. I think that's the most trouble I ever got in, being in the legislature.

JM: And he got it back.

BR: He got it back, but I would have never gotten it back.

JM: I could talk to you for hours. I love this place, and I think these stories—it humanizes the place, too. It really is a place where people did get to know one another for the most part and got along and had a good time and did the public's business at the same time.

BR: Two of the people I admire the most in my thirty years of serving, and there were others, these weren't the only two, but the two that I admired the most, and it had to do with what committee I was on and what my passion was when I came here, the chairman of the Senate Education Committee and for many years after and the Chairman of the House Education for many years after, Don Crumbaker and Joe Harder. They were just my heroes. They knew So, much. I saw them as fair. They were my heroes.

JM: Joe Harder from Mound Ridge and Don Crumbaker from Brewster, way up in northwest Kansas.

BR: Right.

JM: Both Republicans.

BR: Right.

JM: That says something, too.

BR: It wasn't just that I would tell people I really respect these two guys, they were my heroes. I tried to emulate them. And the third one that was a chairman was Roger Robertson, the one that I replaced after he had his epiphany. They were just terrific. I would hope that you could find role models on the other side of the aisle now in the Kansas House, in the Kansas Senate. I don't know.

JM: Let's all hope for that. That's a good point on which to end this. Okay, Bill Reardon, we really appreciate your time. Thanks So, much.

[01:19:12.14]

[story about land turtle, not transcribed]

[End of File]