

Interview with ALICIA SALISBURY by Patty Clark, October 23, 2020
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Patty Clark: The date is October 23rd, 1:30 p.m., and we are in the Senate Chamber of the Kansas State House in Topeka. I'm Patty Clark, and today I have the privilege of visiting with Alicia Salisbury, former State Senator for the Kansas Senate representing District 20 from Topeka. I'll be conducting this interview on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, Incorporated, a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing former legislators, particularly those who served from the 1960s to 2000. These interviews will be made accessible to researchers and to educators. The interviews are funded in part by a grant from the Kansas Humanities Council. The audio and video equipment is being operated by David Heinemann.

Alicia served in the Kansas legislature from 1984 until 2000, a span of sixteen years. She served as the Vice President of the Senate, Chair of the Senate Commerce Committee, Vice Chair of the Education Committee, Vice Chair of Senate Ways and Means. Alicia earned her bachelor's degree from the University of Kansas, and prior to service in the Kansas legislature, she served on the Kansas State Board of Education for four years. Alicia was also a founding Chair of the Kansas Action for Children and served on the Board of Directors of Kansas, Inc. Alicia, thank you very much for giving us time today. We really look forward to this interview.

Alicia Salisbury: Thank you for taking me down memory lane.

PC: There's a lot to remember. Let's begin. Talk a little bit about, take us back prior to your election in the Kansas legislature. What interested you about public service, about politics? Are there any contrasts between then and now?

AS: I grew up actually in a political world. My grandfather had been a state senator from Russell and was what they called Senate President Pro Tem. His picture hangs on the wall of the House side. My father served a term in the House of Representatives and was known as the Father of the Kansas Turnpike. So I had always had joined in campaigns and lived right down the street from the Governor, who I could sell my Girl Scout Cookies to.

I really grew up in a political world, my father being a Topekan, and having one of the larger homes, actually would host the Republican Caucus many times in our house. It was done a little bit differently when I was here than it was back then. But after I graduated from KU, I helped a friend open a new gift shop here in Topeka and started what I would call a career in voluntarism. I joined the Junior League, which I then became President of and several social service boards, some of which I ended up chairing.

So I had gotten in advocacy roles eventually. I was a founding Chair of what became Kansas Action for Children and testified at the State House. I joined a group of Topekans who wanted the authority to change the form of city government. Because I didn't have a real job, I became the volunteer lobbyist. As a member of the State Board of Education, I sometimes testified in front of the Education Committee although Dale Dennis was the one who really spent time at the State House.

PC: I bet dinner conversations in your household were fascinating, given that background and your father and your grandfather serving in the legislature.

AS: They were just home then. It was nothing unusual to discuss the politics of the day.

PC: In what way, speaking of your volunteer service, in what way did serving on the State Board of Education impact your time as a State Senator, good, bad, up, down?

AS: I'm not certain I understand. Serving on the State Board, how did it impact me?

PC: How did it help you as a state legislator, especially with school finance issues?

AS: It really didn't. I really didn't understand school finance at all. The State Board of Education was in some respects a compliance board. We just met two days a month. We really had to approve some of what the staff at the Board of Education had done in compliance with the federal government. I didn't think it was—to me, it was not terribly challenging. I don't want to put it down at all. It's very important, but what I came out with was a passion for work force training.

PC: Talk a little bit more about that, and how you carried that passion forward during your time as a State Senator.

AS: Well, I thought of work force training as being part of a bigger picture because my primary interest was in realizing economic growth here in Kansas. In 1984, Kansas was kind of in a slump and having difficulty having revenues to fully fund the programs that it wanted to fund. Our three-legged stool kind of collapsed under us. I was constantly in search of what was our strategy, and work force training to me was an important component.

PC: Let's talk a little bit more about economic development and the fact that you chaired the Commerce Committee. You served during the period of time that the agency, the Department of Commerce, grew out of the Department of Economic Development. There really wasn't a committee representing the interests of Economic Development early on in your tenure. Talk about that transition—the Redwood-Krider Report. How did we build our efforts in Economic Development during your time?

AS: I think it was a good piece of wisdom that several people worked on to initiate, and that was putting together a [Joint] House - Senate Committee to review the Redwood-Krider Report, to work with the consultant, or to work with the executive branch of government, and produce a strategy for economic development. Who was Governor at that time? John Carlin was Governor. This is just a little personal aside—during the Carlin-Bennett election, I was Shawnee County Chairman for Governor Bennett and ended up working a lot with Governor Carlin.

PC: It was a collaborative, bipartisan effort.

AS: Definitely a collaboration, yes.

PC: Think back to the creation of KTEC [Kansas Technology Enterprise Corporation] and Kansas, Inc. and the Department of Commerce, that triumvirate of Economic Development. What were the challenges of implementation of all of that?

AS: KTEC was probably the harder one.

PC: Why?

AS: I'm not sure I will be the best at describing it. For one thing, we were putting money into private sector. It was entrepreneurial. There were no promises.

PC: No other states doing that at that time?

AS: No, it continued, of course, to be questionable as we went on. Something like it, I'm sure, will fill in.

PC: Those were interesting times indeed. You served with four Kansas governors during your tenure at my count: Governor Carlin, Governor Hayden, Governor Finney, and Governor Graves.

AS: Oh, what a trip!

PC: Let's talk about that trip a little bit. Contrast their styles, how they worked with the legislature.

AS: A huge contrast.

PC: Talk about that. Share with us.

AS: They all had their strengths. I don't know—and they all had their styles, but that is a part of leadership. You just worked differently with them. I listened to Governor Hayden a lot. As a matter of fact, I could hear him from my Senate seat.

PC: He had a booming voice.

AS: Yes, he did.

PC: Did they work with the legislature? You mentioned Carlin. He was very collaborative. Hayden, Finney, Graves?

AS: They all did, absolutely.

PC: The partisanship wasn't as strong as it might have been later on?

AS: I didn't feel that it was, no. There was not one of those four that I wouldn't have approached and did.

PC: And those conversations were always productive?

AS: I thought so. You know, you don't always have to agree, but you have to understand each other.

PC: Talk a little bit more about that. How do you as leadership accomplish that? Those are lessons that these types of interviews can relay to the next generation.

AS: I think #1 is respectful, educational.

PC: You have to have a degree of intellectual curiosity about the other person's view.

AS: You have to be interested in the other person's view because the other person's view may not—even if it's different, isn't necessarily a door closer.

PC: That's very well said. Let's go back. There were a number of unique policies that had momentum and motion during your time. We mentioned the implementation of the proceeds from the lottery and the Redwood-Krider Report, but also liquor by the drink and parimutuel betting. Those were controversial.

AS: Very. Emotional.

PC: Talk about navigating that as an elected official.

AS: Well, I was brand new so I didn't have to do the navigation. I had to understand my constituency.

PC: Talk a little bit about how you learned to understand your constituency.

AS: Going door to door is a good start.

PC: A wide variation in your constituency on those issues?

AS: Yes. .

PC: How did you handle that disagreement?

AS: We had to just simply agree to disagree. However, the disagreement did kick in as time went on. One of my constituents was the Reverend Taylor.

PC: Talk about that experience.

AS: We weren't in agreement, but how far did I want to go in supporting legislation that brought on more parimutuel gambling, that brought on different things within the lottery? By the way, my daughter has joined the Lottery Board or will when she's approved by the full Senate.

PC: The legacy of service in your family continues.

AS: I guess. She didn't run for it. How much more did I want to open those? How wise was it for whatever reason? I kind of stopped there.

PC: You had a line that you didn't cross.

AS: So I heard him.

PC: That's fascinating. We mentioned earlier that you were a part of a wave of females that were elected to the Kansas House and the Kansas Senate. Take us back to those early years of '84, '85, '86. You mentioned that you were called "The Skirts"?

AS: We were called The Skirts. And you know what? We all laughed. I think we all laughed. In 1984, there were three new women in the Senate. We were all Republican. But already here were Nancy Parrish and Norma Daniels. I would have said, I guess I'm going to say that the Senate was kind of a Good Old Boy Club at the time. In the corner of the Senate is where you went when you wanted to smoke and have a cup of coffee. If you went back to pour a cup of coffee, suddenly the conversation among the trousers just dropped.

One really nice amenity that we did not have was a ladies room. That was the coat closet for the doorman. If you had to use a toilet, you walked down off the Senate, and you wended your way through the lobbyists, and went into the ladies room where you could hear what was going on in the Senate because they had the microphone in there.

The first time that I was assigned to carry a piece of legislation in the Senate, I had gone into the ladies room, thinking that I had enough time, and I no more than got in there when I heard, "Senate Bill whatever recognized as the senator from Shawnee, Senator Salisbury." I got a lot of teasing when I came back into the Senate, but it was good natured. You have to have a sense of humor.

PC: So those were your early days. Clearly women were in a minority in the Senate.

AS: There was a time when men didn't change diapers or go to the grocery store or fix dinner or probably wash dishes. That's just the way it was. Four years later, there were some retirements and some new men that came into the Senate who, yes, had taken care of children and so on

and so forth. So there wasn't that—the difference wasn't bad—there were men who were gentlemen and many were farmers and all professions of life. The new men, the younger men had done the same kind of things that women had done in many respects.

PC: And that changed the dynamic a little bit.

AS: Indeed it did.

PC: You transitioned. You clearly played a large leadership role as Vice President of the Senate. Talk a little bit about that ascendancy, the responsibility that it carried, some of your memorable moments as Vice President of the Senate.

AS: First of all, I was a townie. Second of all, I was able to work long hours.

PC: Because you lived in Topeka.

AS: Partially because I lived in Topeka, but partially because I needed to. My constituents could get to me very easily. I had played enough roles in the volunteer sector that I call that in many respects a career. My children didn't live with me. I could do it. I was willing to do it. I have broad interests. So I think that certainly helped. But I had done some work in my committees and some accomplishments that equipped me to go on and ask for an office. I asked.

PC: Bold in that day.

AS: And actually was elected because I asked. Serving under two different presidents was just like we talked about with serving under governors. They're going to have a different style. The person that I did the most with had been a longtime friend, Dick Bond. He liked to work sometimes. Some people would probably laugh at me for saying this, but in some ways behind the scenes he did not care about always being in the High Chair. He loved to call my secretary and say, "Ask Alicia to open the Senate," and he did almost all of the time, and I was willing to do that. I was very active in my last four years.

PC: You mentioned that you had some successes in a variety of committees that led you to making the request to run for the Senate vice presidency. What were some of those successes? What were some of your proudest moments in that committee work?

AS: Sometimes they were very, very small that I had served on an awful lot of committees. The implementation of the economic development strategy that we talked a little bit about earlier, I was very active in that particular role. I felt like I was also quite assertive in the committee composition, the types of legislation and the issues that we were going to dwell on. That's particularly true in Commerce. Most of mine time at the State House was spent in Commerce Issues and Ways and Means. That is a committee that is very demanding, and I served under a very demanding chairman as well, and he liked that.

PC: Who was the Chair?

AS: Gus Bogina. But on the Commerce side, President Burke asked me if I would take on the issues in the committee of Labor and Industry. I said, "Oh my goodness. That really is not my interest." My interest is in seeing the growth of wealth for the state of Kansas, economic development issues. I didn't think that that kind of approach on the Republican side of limiting employment issues to a committee of Labor and Industry in the right approach to what I'm interested in—the development of our state's economy.

We discussed it, and I asked him if he would consider combining a committee under the title of Commerce that worked with employment issues. They had a huge one in workers compensation reform, but also took in education and work force training in particular, the economic development issues. It ended up also picking up telecommunications, which was not a part of the original bargain. And the president was willing to do that. That's how I got into the Commerce Committee.

PC: That's an interesting, interesting journey.

AS: It was an interesting experience, and I was able to be a part of it.

PC: You worked on reappraisal and classification as well.

AS: Yes.

PC: Property taxes.

AS: That was interesting.

PC: Give us some background on that.

AS: I was not so savvy. I joined with Senator Fred Kerr in his proposal on classification of property. I didn't like the approach to break down property into a whole big bundle of classes. That was messy to me. Actually I would have liked to have had it the way it's constitutionally supposed to be, but even though I was new, I was savvy enough to know that that one wasn't going to fly.

So Fred seemed the cleaner of the choices to me. I joined him. That was also when I first had an opportunity to work face to face with Governor Carlin because he called us all together. We discussed the issue. I explained where I was, and he turned to somebody, I don't remember who now, and said, "You know, I think she's got you beat."

PC: There were some deep divisions of opinion over classification and appraisal in those days. How did you help bring those divisions together for a compromise?

AS: I cannot take credit for that.

PC: But you were a part of it. Talk about how it happened.

AS: I think Governor Carlin and his leadership.

PC: And the Senate president and House leadership as well?

AS: Yes.

PC: That's what it takes. Earlier, you mentioned you were a founding Chair for Action for Children, the organization. You also served at a time that the tobacco settlement became reality. Share some thoughts, share some experiences in terms of the tobacco settlement, the need for organizations such as Action for Children, etc.

AS: It was just a good steady resource, and I wanted to keep it coming.

PC: The expertise from Action for Children helped inform and the tobacco settlement helped—

AS: Provide the resources.

PC: Do you feel good about where those resources have been spent, are being spent?

AS: I haven't followed it completely. I probably would argue that it could be more effective, but I don't offer any advice there.

PC: But you feel good about it during the time that you served.

AS: I feel that for children's issues, it was a good resource. Investing in children has just got to be—

PC: We have to keep doing that.

AS: Yes.

PC: So we're going to shift a little bit. There's a question we're asking all of our interviewees, and it deals with personal identity. We're going to loosely define personal identity as gender, age, race, class, sexual or gender orientation, marital status, etc. During your time in the Kansas Senate, do you believe that your personal identity influenced your ability to pass policy, to work with your fellow colleague legislators, or provide constituent services? Do you think that there were ever times when you were given committee assignments or work that were a function of your own personal identity? It's a long question.

AS: Yes, no, yes, no.

PC: Just talk about that. We do come inherent with our own personal identities. How did that play out in your service?

AS: It sometimes did not. I sometimes think it may have even worked against me, people's perception about me. I guess people didn't perceive me as being a real working person, a really common person. Because I'm a lifetime Topekan and because I have been so involved as a volunteer, I think some people thought that I wanted to be above the fray. I certainly didn't perceive myself that way. I was very fortunate that my family was comfortable. I had a very supportive husband who would do anything to stay out of the limelight. Of course, I came in to fill that up whenever I could. I hope you find humor in that.

PC: Absolutely.

AS: He does. I was educated. I was willing to work. I wanted to work. My constituency, I lived in the right district. My constituents knew me or knew of me because I had worked with them on so many social service community endeavors. I loved to go door to door. I loved to come to their meetings and give reports whenever asked. I think I had assets that might appeal to my constituents, which were Republican. It was a Republican district.

PC: I sense that you had to work against some of the perceptions of your personal identity from time to time.

AS: I had to be aware of it. I felt I had to be aware of it. Only one of my four campaigns was really low. I was a little surprised I was taken on the way I was, but my opponent—I didn't have Republican opponents, but I always had a Democrat opponent. For the most part, they were certainly fine people. This one had come from the bureaucracy in Washington, DC. I had to bite my tongue not to call him a carpetbagger. He had a very nice wife who was a lobbyist here at the State House who I got along with swimmingly well. I think it maybe gave the party a chance, the Democrat Party a bit of a chance that I don't know why they really did it.

Being a lifetime Topekan, I felt like I had a good reputation, and my husband certainly had a good reputation. He served on a bank board, and I took on banking deregulation mainly because the chairman of that committee was a banker and didn't really feel that it was appropriate for him to do it. Anything I did like this was a learning curve for me. I didn't know anything about banking except going to the bank. Certainly the bankers in Kansas were willing to teach me.

PC: You were a big part of interstate banking.

AS: Yes.

PC: And the issues with Fourth Financial.

AS: Kansas wasn't even in the game. I think we were the last state to deregulate.

PC: You mentioned with many of these issues, there was a learning curve.

AS: All of them.

PC: What kept you from being intimidated by that learning curve?

AS: I couldn't be effective unless I learned. My gosh, particularly workers compensation. I was learning on the fly.

PC: Is that something that if you were to talk to young women today that are interested in serving in public service, is that a lesson you would express to them, that those learning curves are important? That learning is important in order to do a good job?

AS: Oh, my goodness, yes. We had good research staff here. You can have experiences outside of the State House in order to learn, too. When I managed Telecommunications Reform, I spent two weeks solid at the State Corporation Commission. It's the only way.

PC: Diving into their day-to-day work.

AS: Absolutely. We also had good research here at the State House for the legislature. Two weeks of spring break, that was my self-assignment. I couldn't get anything passed. I had to.

PC: That's remarkable. That is very remarkable and a great lesson.

AS: Another lesson that I got earlier on was the workers compensation legislation. That was a two-year effort, but in the middle of those two years, I was active in the National Conference of State Legislatures.

PC: That's on my list of questions. Go right ahead.

AS: I was assigned to what they referred to as a Blue Ribbon Panel on Workers Compensation. I'm pretty sure, if I recall correctly, I was the only legislator on that panel. The panel was made up of stakeholders in the system. Certainly there were both parties. Because I was a part of developing this plan, strategy, and all states were interested in Workers Compensation reform at the time, because I was a part of developing this strategy, and it came out in written form, I had begun an education.

So when I got back here and we wrote again the bill that was introduced into the House and introduced into the Senate, I did not write that legislation. There was no way I was qualified to write that legislation. But I was qualified to know what policies this panel had embraced. The devil, of course, is in the details.

PC: So an observation, if I may, followed by a question. In your service to the state, where you started was not necessarily where you ended. You ascended to some very critical leadership positions—the Vice President of the Senate, the Chair of the Commerce Committee. With the NCSL, you were on the Executive Committee, which is no small feat. That's a nationwide organization. If you were to name three characteristics within you that provided the substance that helped you ascend to those leadership roles, what would be those three characteristics?

AS: The leadership that I gained through chairing volunteer boards. The desire to work with others. I am not a loner. I'm not a loner socially. I'm not a loner in anything I do. And keeping a sense of humor.

PC: Very good advice. Is there anything that we haven't asked you today that you wish we would have asked you?

AS: Why did I run for the Republican National Committee?

PC: Answer the question.

AS: One thing I think we learn sometimes in our lives, if you want something, you ask for it. I didn't ask for that, but I was asked. I was asked because this was at a time where there were just—Republicans were fighting Republicans. That hasn't stopped, but there was a split. I was considered a centrist. I was elected. I don't mean that everyone wanted to kiss me on the lips, but I was to four years. My friend said, "What? What?" It was an experience. I will say the nice thing about it, there was a Republican in the White House.

PC: At the time.

AS: At the time. I went in there for four years, and actually I'm glad I was asked. There was a split there, too. I was not re-elected.

PC: And a more conservative individual in ideology replaced you, correct?

AS: That is correct.

PC: But nonetheless, it was a valuable experience.

AS: I'm glad I did it.

PC: Anything else you want to share with the audience that's going to listen and view these videos? Any advice, any thoughts that you'd like to share with them?

AS: We all want to think we can make a difference along whichever path we choose in life. You don't always—you can't just go into adulthood always with a design. When you're asked to do

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something, give it some good thought or don't. Just do it. You don't have to put a pledge in for life. I tell you, nine times out of ten, I know I've been so grateful that somebody asked me.

PC: Those are wonderful parting thoughts. Alicia, this has been pure pleasure. This conversation has been illuminating in many, many, many ways. We thank you deeply for participating in the project.

AS: Thank you for giving me the opportunity.

PC: It's been a delight. Thank you.

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