

INTERVIEW OF REPRESENTATIVE JIM MAAG BY JOAN WAGNON, September 28, 2021  
KANSAS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Joan Wagon: The Kansas Oral History Project has reviewed the original transcript of Dr. Burdett Loomis's interview of Representative Jim Maag and wishes to recapture part of the interview on videotape for inclusion in a series on civic education films about the Kansas legislature. This is Joan Wagon, and David Heineman joins me as the videographer.

This is information about Mr. Jim Maag. Jim Maag was elected to the legislature in 1968, representing Dodge City and part of Ford County. His entry into the Kansas legislature was just two years after the very significant one person-one vote decision by the US Supreme Court, which forced statewide reapportionment and changed the whole composition of the Kansas legislature in Kansas and across the country.

Maag was witness to many legislative changes that took place in the latter part of the 21st century. It's the 20th century, isn't it? Whoops. Today we'll discuss many of those changes you were a part of. I can always redo that.

Okay, Jim, here we go. Will you set the stage for your decision to run for the state legislature? Tell me what you were doing in Dodge City.

Jim Maag: We'd gone to Dodge City first in 1964 to teach at the community college. And there was about six years into that that we decided, I didn't decide, ironically it was our bridge group of all people who said, "You ought to run." I said, "Well, you raise the money, and I'll do it," thinking they wouldn't raise the money. But they did. So we got into the race.

The Dodge City district, you would assume since it's in a rural part of the state, was Republican. It wasn't. It had been Democrat for quite a number of years. Even today, it continues to have some strong Democrat involvement. But we had a very contested primary, but then the general election in the fall of 1968, we won by a fairly large margin. So off we went to Topeka.

JW: What were you doing for your professional life?

JM: I was an instructor at the community college in 1968 and held that through 1976. Later on, I think we'll talk about how that all worked out because there had not been any teachers in the legislature except for Bert Chaney, who was an instructor at the Hutchinson Community College. We were kind of in an unusual situation.

JW: So you were there eight years.

JM: No, actually taught twelve years. We started in '64, finished in '76.

JW: So once you were elected, how did you approach that first term? You were probably one of the youngest guys in the legislature then. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

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JM: Yes. I think the youngest person in the legislature then was the guy behind the camera. I was pretty close. I think I was twenty-nine, twenty-eight, somewhere around in there. In those days, the average legislator was an older individual, and a lot of these guys, I say "guys" because there was only one gal, had been in the war, World War II, and in some instances, Korea. It was an interesting situation to be that young and be involved with people who had had that much life experience.

JW: Were there any of the legislators who took you under their wing?

JM: Yes. Of course, keep in mind in those days the power structure was pretty tightknit. Whoever was Chairman of Ways and Means, whoever was the Majority Leader, whoever was Speaker, they wielded a great deal of power. They were not—they didn't go out of their way, let's put it this way. They didn't go out of their way to help freshmen understand the process because it was in their best interest to keep it away from us as long as possible.

One man that comes to mind was the Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, Bill Fribley from southeast Kansas. Bill was a really hardnosed, "don't leave any prisoners" type of guy. He ate freshmen legislators like us for lunch, I think. But at the other end of the scale was Clyde Hill, an attorney from Yates Center down in Woodson County. He literally held little schools with the freshmen legislators to teach them how the process worked, this sort of thing. So everything balanced out in the end. There were a lot of people in the middle who were freshmen who took the freshmen under their wing and gave them good information about how the process works.

JW: Did the Chambers look much like the one we're sitting in right now? What was it like?

JM: Oh, it was drab. My gosh, you can't imagine how drab the Chamber was in those days. In fact, that applies to the whole Capitol Building. The Capitol Building was in terrible shape, but nothing was being done because we had a Democrat governor, i.e., Bob Docking, and we had a Republican legislature by two-thirds majority, and neither side wanted to be blamed for spending the money on renovating the Capitol Building. So here we sat.

By the end of the session, this place was just a giant trash barrel, it seemed like. We had the confection stand right outside the House Chamber here. You could only imagine what it looked like by the end of a twelve-hour day.

JW: You could at least keep your office clean, couldn't you?

JM: Yes, if we had one, which we didn't. No, it wasn't until a decade later that we began to get positions, get chairs and office desks, this sort of thing into nooks and crannies of the Capitol Building, so legislators would have a little more privacy and a chance to do work under normal circumstances.

JW: I heard a rumor that you didn't even have a telephone on your desk.

JM: That's right. We didn't have telephones. Well, I take that back. I think we shared a telephone. Of course, we didn't have them at night. That was another part of the process that was kind of unusual. Since we couldn't use the phones on our desk for long distance calls back to the district or such. So we would come up here at night and sit around here in the Chamber and shoot the breeze and wait for our number to come up. It was kind of like going to a Baskin-Robbins. You had to take a number. Then you could only talk so long. But it was very educational for us freshmen to have this kind of a change of tutorship.

JW: Who was your seatmate?

JM: My two seatmates, one was Austin Nothern who was a tax attorney here in Topeka, an excellent tax attorney, I might add. He was a freshman, just like we were. He was a lot smarter than most of us were. And on my other side was Paul Dugan, later to become the Lieutenant Governor of Kansas under John Carlin. Dugan, as we called him, "Doogie," was quite a character. He was sometimes known as the Phantom because he would tend to come in in the late morning on Tuesday and leave early on Thursday. There's another story connected with that that we could talk about later.

JW: Why were there so many lawyers? Were there lots of lawyers?

JM: Oh, yes. When we started, the lawyers dominated this place. My gosh, I think in the House, there were somewhere between forty and fifty lawyers in the House of Representatives and on the Judiciary Committee. In the Senate, it was the same way. It was heavily, heavily lawyers.

I think what changed it to the point where today some of the committees, one Judiciary Committee in the Senate didn't even have a lawyer in this last session. But what changed that was in 1972, when Morris Kay ran for Governor, the Docking people came down on him hard on the fact that he had missed so many votes on the House floor. As a result, when Docking won overwhelmingly in that election, the Republican leadership decided, "Hey, we've got to do something about this absenteeism." As I mentioned earlier, we had lawyers like Dugan who would come up here and maybe spend a day and a half and go home to keep their business going.

So starting in 1973, you voted on every bill. It was a big deal. Well, you do that, and that takes the lawyers or the professional people out of the loop because they simply aren't going to spend that much time in the legislative process.

JW: Sure. One of the things that interested me the most about your earlier interview was the conversation that you had about what happened after this big redistricting effort. You were talking about how you were on the cusp of major change, and you had the Shortgrass Boys. I had no ideas what the Shortgrass Boys were. So tell me about the Shortgrass Boys and the change.

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JM: Yes. Essentially these were the rural people, the rural legislators. It was a term that, as I remember, everybody used all the time. It wasn't unusual. Speaker McGill used to also say, "Boys," again we had very few women, he would say, "Well, boys, we have a lot of hay down today. So we've got to work hard." There were a lot of agricultural cliches.

JW: So in order to get things done, you formed some kind of a coalition with the urban groups. This is something that hadn't been done before. Is that right?

JM: Yes, that's right. This was really out of the loop, so to speak, and it was mainly the Wichita and Johnson County legislators, most Democrats, but some Republicans who had this urban coalition set up. We held meetings all over the state. Back up, the only nonurban types with that group were myself and Dave Heinemann, the representative from Garden City. And we would meet all over the state to kind of get a background as to what's possible and what's not possible in terms of legislation. We were not looked upon kindly by a lot of the rural legislators, but in the end, it resulted in some pretty significant changes in the law such as the gas tax. I can't remember specifics, but there were several bills that were a direct result of the urban coalition network.

JW: Yes. The eight years that you were in the legislature were characterized by your moving up consistently into the leadership positions. How did that happen? You started as a rank and file, but you provided leadership in that urban coalition, and pretty soon, you were elected to I think an Assistant Majority—

JM: Assistant Majority Leader. Indirectly it had something to do with the urban coalition, but it was just the way that the rocks fall, so to speak, that in 1973, a legislator from Johnson County who had been Speaker Pro Tem—I need to back up to 1972, when there was going to be an election for Majority Leader once the general election was over. And some of the urban coalition types wanted me to run for that, and I was kind of reluctant to do it, but I said I'd give it a try

On the other side, Donn Everett who was an attorney from Manhattan was going to run for Majority Leader. As it turned out, as we got closer to the day of choosing leadership, it became apparent that the Everett crowd had a majority. But they also didn't want to wind up with a big split in the party, if our group decided to keep pursuing it. So they came to us and said, "Hey, let's do this. We'll be the Majority Leader office, and you take the Assistant Majority Leader office." Seemingly, a very reasonable decision, and it kept us from having internal fights.

That was the first time that we had had an Assistant Majority Leader for the House of Representatives. It was after that, in 1974, the session of '74, that one of the representatives, the representative from Johnson County who had the position of Speaker Pro Tem, which is theoretically the third key position in the House of Representatives, he was forced to resign his position. So there had to be an interim election as to who was going to be Pro Tem for the remainder of the 1974 session. I backed out of that at the time. Wendell Lady from Johnson

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County ran against Ansel Tobias who was a rural legislator out of McPherson County, and Tobias won. So he remained as the Pro Tem through the 1974 session.

Come 1975, we got a new legislature here, and Speaker McGill who was being elected for his second term as Speaker came to me and said, "I really, really, really want you to run for Pro Tem." I was really reluctant to do it because Ansel Tobias was a good friend and a great guy, but I said, "Okay, I'll give it a shot," and we won that. So for '75 and '76 sessions, I had the position of Pro Tem.

Pro Tem is pretty much at the wishes of whatever the Speaker wants it to be. In his particular case, Pete McGill didn't much enjoy sitting up there in the chair. He liked to be out amongst them, spreading rumors and threatening people. No, seriously, he just didn't enjoy sitting in the chair. So I presided over the House probably 90 percent of the time during those two years.

And he was very kind to let us sit in and sometimes participate in the strategy sessions that we had with the Majority Leader John Hayes and the Ways and Means Chairman, and these types of people. So it was a fun experience.

JW: And you enjoyed being up in that chair.

JM: It was fun. It was fun.

JW: Talk to me a little bit about what really surprised you when you got here. What were your expectations, and what was it really like?

JM: Well, I suppose a lot of our concepts of what went on in the legislature were formed with going into movies such as Mr. Smith Goes to Congress or whatever that one was with Jimmy Stewart. So you came up here, and you assumed that the minute that you got into your seat, in your chair that there were going to be bills stacked up on your desk, and you were going to be in deep, philosophical discussions about what's going on. And the fact was that by 11:00 in the morning, you didn't have anything to do. So you kind of rummaged around, getting into all kinds of trouble, I suspect, as far as getting people to be mad at you when you didn't support their legislation.

But one of the interesting aspects of that was that in the afternoons, a lot of the legislators lived in the Hotel Jayhawk and the Hotel Kansan right downtown here. At the Hotel Kansan, they were lined to the YMCA. So in the afternoon, a bunch of us would go over and play basketball for a couple of years before we went out and hit the streets. In the end, we became kind of a close-knit group. We decided, "Maybe we could play charity games around the city and such," and we did. We traveled, oh gosh, I don't know, Marysville. We went to Carbondale, towns that were within a short distance of Topeka and played these charity games.

But the big thing that happened that year was that there were enough Republicans and enough senators who liked to play basketball that they threatened each other to have a game between

the Senate and the House, and we had it right across the street here in high school, and we packed the place. It was a huge crowd. Everybody thought the House would dominate because we had more people and we had younger people. It didn't work that way. The Senate were a very crafty bunch. They had Bob Storey and people like this. I think the only senator that didn't play in the game was Bob Bennett, and he didn't know what a basketball looked like.

But in the end, it was a fun deal, and we did raise quite a bit of money. Ironically, we then, a couple years later, we went on to play the Missouri legislature in a game, one here in Topeka, and then we traveled to Jeff City and played a game over there. I think we claimed that we were national champions because we couldn't find any other legislature that was willing to have a game.

JW: In order for a legislature to work, it almost seems like you have to have some way to bring people together so they can get to know each other. You used basketball. Tell me about the importance of the Jayhawk.

JM: Well, the Jayhawk or the Caravan Club, there were several places around town that legislators tended to gather. It was a very beneficial change. Otherwise a lot of legislators would have not had a chance to sit around and talk with people, other legislators in a calm manner. So the watering holes, as they were called, would have, oh, gosh, I don't know, any given night, fifteen to twenty legislators, I suppose, standing around and discussing legislation. I truly believe it had a beneficial impact on legislation, that you would get people down here during debate on the floor, kind of grinding it out with each other. Frank Gaines, who started out as a representative and then became a senator was a classic example. He would come up here and just raise holy hell about a bill. And then that evening he and whoever he was raising hell against would sit down and have a drink and get things worked out. So, from that standpoint, I thought the opportunity to have these social interactions was really good.

In 1974, '75, the Speaker of the House, Pete McGill, the President of the Senate, Bob Bennett decided that what we really needed to do was close all of the watering holes, that legislators should get their pertinent information in the more traditional manner. That didn't fit well with legislators, nor with lobbyists for that matter who in most instances were picking up the tab for these get-togethers.

So for a while, it was a little touch and go as to whether we were going to have these places available, and in the end, it did. It all kind of went back to the way it had been before 1974. But that wasn't true of other things. The changes that came about between 1971 and 1980 were in large part due to the NCSL, the National Conference on State Legislatures, which was pushing a major change in how legislatures operated, and they put out a book, *The Sometimes Government*, which was a terrible indictment of 90 percent of the legislatures around the country that they said they were inefficient. They simply weren't doing the job that they needed to do. So they decided, "We'll just find out how well they're doing. We'll take a survey as to who's the best and who's the worst among state legislatures."

And it came out that we were in the bottom ten, I think. This did not sit well at all with the leadership. So we set about to make these changes, and that's where the majority of the big changes came in terms of consolidation of various agencies and having offices available, having all kinds of services available to legislators that had not been there before and getting their work done and getting it done in an appropriate manner. So the NCSL book was a huge, huge factor in getting certain legislation passed.

JW: The book may have been a huge factor in kind of waking everybody up to the fact that Kansas was in the bottom ten, but leaders took it upon themselves to make the kind of changes to modernize the legislature, and it was that modernization that gave rise to all kinds of productive legislation.

JM: Absolutely.

JW: Who led that charge? Was it Bob Bennett? Was it Pete McGill? Who was it?

JM: It was both of them and then some. Pete Loux who was the Minority Leader from Wichita was a major part of that. Pat Hurley who was also in the House during that period. You had, I think here again, the urban coalition was kind of reborn with the opportunities that we now had to make change. It was an exciting time. I think if it hadn't been for that work that was done by NCSL and the legislative leadership around the country that we may still be in the trough.

JW: But it took ten years for that to work through because it took leadership from legislators, and it took leadership from governors. At some point, you developed a relationship with Robert Bennett and went to work for him in the Governor's Office

JM: That's right. I did. That was after my last session in 1976. I didn't particularly have a close relationship with the governor, but I got to know him quite well. Then when I went to work for him, of course, we had a lot of things to talk about. But I would contend that the legislative process had enhanced so much by 1973 that that session of the Kansas legislature was maybe the best one in Kansas history because you had the creation of the SRS [Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services]. You had the creation of the Department of Transportation and a lot of the small agencies and such were combined.

Some you couldn't quite get it worked out. For instance, there were a lot of people who wanted to move the State Treasury into a closer relationship with the Governor's Office. It didn't work. There were certain agencies that you thought would be logical to combine them. Take, just to example, the Barbering Board and the Cosmetology Board. No way were those people going to go for any kind of consolidation. But the major things were the big ones, the SRS, the Department of Transportation. A spin-off was the Governmental Ethics Commission also came into view. We eliminated certain agencies such as the State Auditor's Office ultimately and combined it with a legislative process.

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As I say, I think the '73 session was maybe the most important one we ever had in the state. And incidentally I might add that it was that same session that we played the basketball game with Missouri.

JW: And won.

JM: So we were busy.

JW: Good. So why did you leave to go work for Bennett?

JM: Yes, that was a tough decision. I had been Pro Tem for those last two years of '65, '66, and I decided if I was going to stay in the legislature, I had to run for Speaker. The problem was that you couldn't make enough money as Speaker to be able to move your family to Topeka and establish a place here. We didn't want to leave Dodge under any circumstance if we could avoid it. So that's when the Governor and Miguel, I think, said, "Hey, let' see if Maag would be willing to come work for you."

The Governor, the first two years of his administration were pretty tough years. He just didn't have enough staff. He didn't have the right kind of staff to make things work. So we decided we'd take a crack at this. Those were two interesting years because in the Senate, the Republicans only had a 21-19 advantage. Several of those 21 votes were not friends of Bennett's. So you had this situation of every bill that came up seemingly we had to have this knockdown, drag-out fight because the Governor was not a good friend of the Majority Leader and vice versa. You had several who just for whatever reason didn't like to vote for anything that Bennett had been involved in.

So we had many a battle on the Senate floor. Ross Doyen who was the President of the Senate at that time, he tried mightily to keep the Republicans in line, but it was tough. It was tough. But in the end, we did some things that were very positive, particularly in the last two years, '77, '78. We had two good sessions there that got a lot of our legislative program done.

JW: So Bennett runs for re-election, and he loses to John Carlin.

JM: Right.

JW: What happened to you at that point?

JM: Hari-kari seemed like a possibility. But what made it doubly difficult for us was that my wife, Kathy, was Mrs. Bennett's secretary. So we were both out of a job at this point. The next couple of years were challenging. I served for about a year and a half as Assistant Secretary of State under Jack Brier. I'd had several opportunities to go other places. I told Jack, "Let's take a run at this, and we'll see what happens."

Well, in one of those moments that you get in your lifetime, I saw on a Sunday morning, a United States Senator, Nancy Kassebaum called and said, "How'd you like to come to Washington and work for me?" I'd have given my right arm to be able to do that under other circumstances, but with two young children and the costs of moving to Washington were just too overwhelming. I told her that I just couldn't, but I was extremely honored that she would call.

The other fortuitous thing that occurred in that time period was the leadership of the Kansas Bankers Association changed hands. Karl Bowman retired. Harold Stones who had been their Chief Lobbyist moved up as the new Secretary. I guess that's what we called him. He changed the name about three times. I think it was President, ultimately. But then Harold came to me and asked me if I would be willing to come to work for the KBA, and the rest is history. I worked there for twenty-five years.

JW: Had you had significant banking experience.

JM: No, zero, zip. It was Harold's philosophy because he had never been a banker either, it was his philosophy that you learn these things. It will all come to you. It probably didn't come to me as fast as it came to him, but it was. It was a wonderful, wonderful experience, great people to work for.

JW: And you spent the next—

JM: Twenty-five years.

JW: Twenty-five years. Wow. So the last thing I'd like to ask you to think about and reflect on is the multiplicity of roles that you played. You came from an educational background. You were teaching college students. You ran for the legislature at a time when people really didn't want educators there. And you moved up and found a leadership track that took you to an administrative position in state government and then from there as a lobbyist. When you think back on all of that, how did you work as a lobbyist? Was it tough making that transition?

JM: Well, yes and no. It's never easy to lose what was really a good position. But it helped in many ways, the years as a legislator were very beneficial for approaching legislators about legislation that the association were interested in. I would say that the lobbying experience was the most interesting by far. People would sometimes ask you, "Which is the best way to be? Don't you want the power of being a legislator?" or "Do you want the power of trying to convince legislators that what the banks want is a good thing?"

In the end, I think there's no doubt that having the power of a vote was huge. If I had to do it all over again, I'd probably go with the bankers again anyway because the lobbying field is interesting. You were colleagues with a lot of very interesting people that were full-time lobbyists. It was a challenge, but I think if I had to do it all over again, being a legislator was the most interesting.

JW: So you've seen the legislature through times when you didn't have an office, when you were disorganized as the legislature itself, all the way through this modernization process. And then you began to be able to influence things like multi-bank holding companies, branch banking, significant changes that benefited consumers across the state.

JM: Right.

JW: How do you think about all that change? What do you look back and say, "I'm really glad we got these things done"?

JM: In fact, I think of the bills that we passed during the years that I was with the Association that we didn't have very many bills that we didn't like that made it finally to the Governor's desk. But it was not without a lot of sweat, blood, toil, and tears. For instance, the Multi-Bank Holding Company Act, which was passed in 1985, we came down to a tie vote here in the House of Representatives, and the Speaker of the House at that time, Mike Hayden from Atwood, was strongly opposed to multi-bank holding companies. The President of the Senate was in favor of it. The Governor, Carlin, was in favor of it.

Well, it came down to the final vote on the bill, and it was here in the House. It was 62-62, and we needed one more vote. Mike Petersen who was representing from Wyandotte County had not been able to get to the Capitol Building that morning for some reason. We don't know what the problem was. But the Governor said, "I think we can make sure he gets a chance to vote." So the Highway Patrol was sent, and Mr. Petersen made it back to Topeka in what may have been record time, and the final vote was 63-62, and the bill was passed.

Of all the legislation that we dealt with over the years, I don't think I ever felt as relieved after the passage of a bill as I did that one. And, of course, it turned out to have a big impact on the banking industry.

JW: Huge.

JM: Yes. It really did.

JW: Do you think of anything else during that long career that you had that you'd like to put on tape and share those insights with others? Anything, whether it was in the original interview or not.

JM: I think the other thing that you really, really enjoyed as a legislator and a lobbyist was the opportunity to meet wonderful people, wonderful and unique people. Some you were around a lot more than others, but I always felt that other legislators deserved the right of being sociable with you. That would be the biggest thing, the characters you met. My goodness, my goodness, unbelievable characters.

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Then the social atmosphere that you had around it, particularly when it involved the wives of legislators, the big parties and this sort of thing. It was a real, real experience, and you liked to think that Kansas was a better place for the work that you did on it, and I think it has proven over the years that our legislature has a process that is right and it can be extremely beneficial for the State of Kansas.

Incidentally, the NCSL survey, which we had started out as I think, #46 or something like that. I mean, we were pretty close to the bottom. By the end of the second session after that came out, we were #1 in the nation in terms of improvement. You really have to give the leadership a lot of credit for that. It was something that we were very proud of that we'd accomplished.

JW: That's remarkable. It was a nice career you had, Mr. Maag. Thank you for doing this.

JM: Thank you. I appreciate it.

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