

Interview of Jim Slattery by Jim McLean, March 6, 2020
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Jim McLean: The date is March 6, 2020 and we're here in midafternoon in the House Chambers in the Kansas State House in Topeka, Kansas. I'm Jim McLean, a reporter and editor of the Kansas News Service. I covered the legislature and Kansas politics for more than thirty years. I will be interviewing Jim Slattery, a former Kansas representative and Congressman. I'll be conducting the interview on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, Inc., a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing former legislators, particularly those who served from 1960 to 2000. The interviews will be made accessible to researchers and educators. These interviews are funded in part by a grant from the Kansas Humanities Council. The audio and video equipment is being operated by David Heinemann, himself a former member of the Kansas House.

[video begins here.]

Jim McLean: Jim Slattery, you were a Congressman from the State of Kansas as for a long time in the eighties and the nineties, but before that, you were a member of the Kansas House. You got your political career started right here in the 1972 election. Your first term was in 1973, and you ran as a very young man while in law school. So something must have triggered that impulse in you. What was it?

Jim Slattery: Well, as I look back over that time, there's no question that Senator Bobby Kennedy had a big influence and inspiration in my life. I met him here in Topeka the day after he announced his candidacy for president in 1968 at Billard Airport here in Topeka, where he landed with Governor Docking, flying in from Kansas City. It was all spontaneous, and then I followed him the next day to Manhattan for a Landon Lecture, and then later in the day, we put together sort of spontaneously this visit to Allen Fieldhouse, where about 20,000 people showed up. Long story short, he was a great inspiration to me. He inspired me with this idea that we all have a duty to be involved in public affairs, and that politics is a noble calling, and that we can make a difference.

JM: And you took that to heart.

JS: I took that to heart. I believed that, and I believe that to this day. Anyway, long story short is after I came back from basic training and the military, I went to law school. My freshman year in law school, I decided to run for the legislature. I studied this whole situation in Topeka, and I thought, I was sort of naive enough to think that if I just went out and asked people to vote for me, they would. I went out and started knocking on doors all over central Topeka.

In the process, I would have these 3 x 5 cards with me, and I would keep track of the names and addresses and phone numbers of everybody who said they would—were they going to support me, I would ask them if I could put a yard sign up. My whole campaign plan was to put up 500 to 1,000 yard signs in this rather compact legislative district here in central Topeka.

JM: As I understand the story though, that actually worked for you, that you decided one day that you were going to put most of them up all at the same time. They're just going to come out of nowhere, right?

JS: That was the plan. Within the matter of a day, we would put up 500, 1,000 yard signs in this district and get everybody's attention. What just happened? It did work because we targeted 10th Street. I knew that that was the street that Governor Docking would typically drive coming in from Cedar Crest to the Capital Building to his office. The day that we put up all these signs, by 7:30 in the morning, the governor had called me. I'll never forget, Mary Hanfelt, his assistant, reached me and said was I available to talk with the governor. Of course, I'm available to talk to the governor of Kansas as a twenty-four-year-old law student. The governor said, "They tell me that you have an excellent chance of winning this race. Is there anything that I can do to help you?" and I said, "Well, Governor, there is. I don't have any money. I need to raise some money." So he gave me a list—

JM: You spent it all on yard signs.

JS: He gave me the list of four or five very prominent people in Topeka. He had called them and said, "Help this guy." They did. I remember going back that evening to my campaign headquarters, which was the living room in my house at 1322 Lincoln. Anyway, we had a great beer-and-pizza party that evening.

JM: How close were you to the election when all of this happened?

JS: Probably about four weeks, six weeks out.

JM: How did that election turn out?

JS: I ended up winning with almost 60 percent of the vote. It was very interesting. In 1972, remember that McGovern was at the top of the ticket in 1972. Docking was also on the ticket. He was running for re-election in '72, and Bill Roy was running for re-election. Even though the McGovern presence at the top of the ticket was a bit of a drag, the fact that Bob Docking and Bill Roy, who were both very popular in my district at least and also in Kansas at that time, their presence on the ticket really helped.

JM: Right. At that time, we can get more into this later, but the partisan makeup of the Kansas House was a lot more equal in those days than it was in subsequent years, right?

JS: If I remember correctly, when I entered in 1972, there were 48 Democratic seats here in the House, out of 125. There were a bunch of us young folks that got together. Jim Parrish was one of them and Roger Robertson from Hutchinson, me, and a number of other young Turks on the Democratic side got together and decided we were going to do everything we could to elect a majority in the Kansas House.

JM: Four years later, you did.

JS: Four years later, we did, some very funny and interesting stories there. One of them is that I had been working to recruit a candidate to run out of a western Kansas district. I was very frustrated that he kept putting me off and putting me off and not actually getting signed up to run. On the night before the filing deadline, I called him up and I said, "What in the world is going on? Are you going to file or not?" and he finally told me, "My wife doesn't want me to run." My reaction was, "I wish you would have told me that six weeks ago or six months ago."

Anyway, long story short, I had lined up the pilot for fly this guy in from western Kansas. The pilot was Jack Rodrock. Jack had never been to the state capital, had no thought about running for the state legislature. But he got here, and I met him. I was really impressed with him. He had just gotten back from Vietnam. He was a combat veteran from Vietnam. I said, "Jack, maybe you should run." He sort of laughed. I said, "I'm sorry. You just got back from Vietnam. People will appreciate your service to our country. Think about it."

The next day he calls me up and he said, "You know, I really like Topeka. I like the Capitol Building. It was nice to meet you" and that sort of thing. The long story short, he became the candidate. He ran, and he won. He served I don't know how many terms, probably five or six terms. Anyway, that's how Jack Rodrock's career in the state legislature began.

JM: That's a great story about him but also you. You weren't going to leave that race.

JS: No, it was a race—our approach was very simple. I did not go out and look for prominent Democrats to run in these districts that we had targeted. We went out to find community leaders that were highly respected in their community and to try to motivate them to become a Democratic candidate for Congress or for the legislature. That worked. If the Democrats in Kansas, if I had any piece of advice for them today on this, find respected community leaders and motivate them to run as Democrats, if they ever want to get the majority back.

JM: Okay. We skipped ahead a little bit. Let's go back to your first term, '73, '74.

JS: Yes, 1973-74.

JM: Talk about—the state was really undergoing a transformation at the time, the state government was.

JS: Yes.

JM: Those early years, when you first started tackling the school finance problem that has bedeviled the State ever since then.

JS: The whole issue is how in the world do you really achieve equal funding for school districts in the state?

JM: So the kids would have an equal opportunity.

JS: Yes. Historically the property tax payers paid for local education. There was very little of any state support for local education in the local school districts. Then we had these Supreme Court cases that invalidated this and said in effect that states had a legal obligation to equalize educational opportunity within their borders, within their jurisdiction. That gave rise to a lot of this discussion and debate about what kind of school finance formula we were going to have in Kansas. How would you use state money to equalize education?

JM: To balance the scales.

JS: Yes. So to make sure that the kids in Galena had the same educational opportunity that the kids in Johnson County had, to use an example of one of the poorest districts and one of the wealthiest.

JM: That's an example that's often cited.

JS: Yes. It was a hotly debated issue because, bottom line, what we were doing is taking state money that was coming primarily from wealthy counties, and we were transferring it to poorer school districts in Wyandotte County or in Sedgwick County or in the rural areas of Kansas. This all came on the heels of school consolidation, which arguably ended the Avery administration that preceded the Docking administration. So that was highly controversial. It was part of this whole debate over how in the world we were going to equalize educational opportunity at the primary and secondary levels.

JM: There are local control issues in that all through that, too. That debate continues to this day.

JS: Absolutely. I remember very clearly that back in those days, Johnson County, this was a testament to the wisdom of the leadership in Johnson County, post-World War II in the fifties and sixties, seventies, and even to this day—

JM: Quality schools built that county.

JS: Absolutely. Their commitment to public education in Johnson County was second to none in the country. They wanted to preserve their right to tax themselves locally to enhance their local school districts in Kansas City. But if we were going to equalize funding, we had to limit what they could do.

JM: You had to control it at one end and boost it on the other end, right.

JS: That was a tough argument to make. If the local community wants to spend more money to enhance their public education system, why shouldn't they be able to do it? Again, we were struggling with this whole effort to equalize educational opportunity.

JM: So you had that debate going on, and then you also had the beginnings of the debate to create this new social welfare agency in the state. There were poor farms all over the state, and counties essentially were responsible for taking care of people who needed help, welfare, so to speak. So that agency was created, the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services was created about that same time, which you modernized the highway department of the Kansas Department of Transportation. You got here at a time when some pretty substantial changes were being made.

JS: There were huge changes going on. The school finance system had to be completely restructured. We were struggling on how to fund the highway system in the state. We were doing other things even during the time when the Democrats were in the majority here, and that is we passed out of the House, think about this, in the 1970s, a bill to decriminalize small amounts of marijuana, and we did it with the support of the head of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation and the Kansas Highway Patrol.

JM: Really?

JS: That bill died in the Senate, but it passed in the 1970s here in Kansas.

JM: They're still debating that.

JS: I give Mike Glover from Lawrence a lot of credit for this in pushing that issue. We were right, and the head of the KBI and the head of the Kansas Highway Patrol at that time, they were right, and I'm happy I voted for that.

JM: So let me get this straight. You were pushing legislation in the Kansas House to decriminalize marijuana.

JS: Small amounts.

JM: At the same time that Attorney General Vern Miller was jumping out of trunks [of cars] to prosecute students at KU primarily.

JS: That's right. You know something? Vern Miller was quite a character. God bless him. I still like Vern Miller.

JM: He was a unique person.

JS: A unique person, and Vern Miller was doing something that was very legitimate and important.

JM: Right, if the laws on the books were going to enforce it.

JS: That's right. He would say to the legislature, "If you don't like the laws, change the bloody law. But if I'm the state's chief law enforcement officer, I am going to enforce the law, all the laws, and I'm going to enforce them with equal force."

JM: You talked about a crop of young people, yourself included, who came into the legislature about that time, and you built your numbers, again headed for the majority in 1976. You also were ahead of your time in the sense that, as I understand it, one of your first pieces of legislation that you were interested in passing was campaign finance reform.

JS: Absolutely. This all, keep in mind, was coming on the heels of what was going on in Watergate, although Nixon didn't leave office until '74, but all of this stuff was happening and bubbling up in Washington. There was a state controversy involving the governor's brother that was very controversial at the time.

JM: It had to do with the construction of the medical center in Kansas City.

JS: It all gave rise to this discussion. There was bipartisan interest in trying to enact reasonable campaign finance reform. I was probably the leading Democrat pushing this. I wanted to outlaw anonymous contributions. I wanted to put limits on the amount of contributions to state offices and state races.

&The other thing I wanted to do, which I still think is a good idea, and I got this out of the state House. It passed when we were in the majority, and that was to permit Kansas taxpayers to add on a dollar or two on their tax return.

JM: A check-off.

JS: Not a check-off, an add-on. It was harder to get the check-off than it was the add-on, but I wanted to use—

JM: So public financing of campaigns.

JS: You can call it what you like, but we wanted to give and use the tax system as a way to help raise money to finance political campaigns and run that money through the political party, so that a Republican could designate, "I'm giving three dollars or five dollars," whatever, to the Republican state committee or the Democratic state committee, and I thought that would be a way to reduce the demand to raise money from special interest groups.

JM: It would allow people to give little bits of money.

JS: Small amounts. It would also empower the state parties so that they could really be more actively involved in the political debate.

JM: What was your interest in reforming the campaign finance system, other than the fact that when you first ran, you didn't have any money?

JS: I didn't have any money, but—

JM: I'm just kidding about that. What was your motivation?

JS: My motivation was I really did believe, and I believe to this day, that one of the great threats—it's worse now than it's ever been because of Citizens United and the McCutcheon cases that basically have unleashed the super wealthy and the billionaire class, if you will, in the United States, to play in the political arena. I think that's a danger to our democracy, and I believe that back in the day, that money was having too much of an influence in the political process even then.

&The other thing that was going—see, these conversations stimulate a lot of memories, I suppose—the other thing that was going on was there was scandals here in Kansas dealing with the highway program and the highway contractors.

JM: Right.

JS: A bunch of them got in trouble. They were accused of rigging bidding and that sort of thing. There was a lot of interest in this. Those highway contractors were very generous in their political contributions, too. Anyway, all of that sort of fed into the need to clean up the campaign finance system.

JM: I had a recent conversation with former governor John Carlin who talked about when he got elected in 1978, the expectation of patronage was you let highway commissioners across the state just pick the highway projects they were going to fund because they had so many connections to those contractors. You were on the cusp of that, on the front of that, but that certainly, there was a wave of reform in the post-Watergate years.

JS: There was.

JM: But you were out in front of that here in Kansas.

JS: The other thing that was going on at that time is that there was a sort of nationwide effort to empower state legislatures, and it was a national effort. That's something that we can't overlook either because this was at a time when we didn't have professional staff adequately

staffing state legislatures all over the country. Kansas in the 1970s was one of the leading legislatures in the country—in fact, we got national awards and recognition as one of the best state legislatures because of the commitment that the legislature made to staffing, like the legislative research department.

JM: Building up your staff. So you had nonpartisan staff.

JS: Nonpartisan, professional staff. They provided the legislature with incredibly good information that was objective. It wasn't partisan slanted or anything. It was good, solid information, and legislators on both sides of the political aisle accepted that data, and the information that we were getting from the legislative research service.

JM: So you could have a debate on the same set of facts.

JS: Absolutely. Everybody was debating from the same set of facts.

JM: I'm struck in this conversation that some of the issues we're talking about, a decriminalization of marijuana to a small extent, campaign finance reform, and then I want to talk to you a little bit about some of the environmental issues you were interested in back then. I'm just struck by the fact that those debates that you're recalling from that time, those things are not settled law today.

JS: Yes.

JM: But talk a little bit about your interests. The environment plays right along with campaign finance in terms of some of the things that particularly young people entering politics at the time were interested in.

JS: During my first term, I was on an interim study committee with one of my classmates that came in with me in 1972, former Governor Mike Hayden. We served on this interim committee to study the whole issue about mine land reclamation in southeast Kansas. In the sixties and early seventies, Big Bertha was this massive crane down in—

JM: Big Brutus.

JS: Big Brutus. I stand corrected, Big Brutus. Big Brutus was this massive crane that was being used to just strip mine southeast Kansas. The problem was is that the mining companies that were most of them out of state were making no effort to reclaim the land that was devastated by this strip mining operation.

JM: They were leaving a scar. They were just moving on from—

JS: They were just moving on. The thought was, and Mike Hayden and I were on this study committee, and we came back—both of us supported the legislation that the interim committee developed that basically said, “If you're going to strip-mine in southeast Kansas, you're going to have to reclaim the land. We're going to not leave this land destroyed. It's going to be required that you will have to restore it to some kind of workable condition, for grazing purposes or whatever it could be used for.”

The net effect of all that was that the high sulfur coal being produced in southeast Kansas was no longer profitable to mine because the cost of reclaiming the land dramatically increased the cost of the coal being produced there. The bottom line, the strip-mining business in southeast Kansas was basically shut down, but the more important powerful market forces at play was a few years later. The Potter River Basin in Wyoming came into the market with low sulfur coal, which was more environmentally friendly than the high sulfur coal being produced in southeast Kansas in the strip-mining operations.

JM: That issue has continued to progress. We have played the coal industry out entirely now.

JS: We did. A very significant environmental achievement, as far as I'm concerned.

JM: We've talked to Mike Hayden for this series. The environment was truly his issue. It is what motivated him to run for the legislature in the first place. The fact that you two teamed up on that bill—did you come in at the same time?

JS: We came in at the same time, the Class of '72. Mike had returned just a year or so earlier from Vietnam, where he had a distinguished combat record. A good man.

JM: The issue of nuclear power for Kansas was starting to percolate a little bit later than that, but you were involved in that, too, because the Wolf Creek Nuclear Power Plant is Kansas's first and only nuclear power plant.

JS: I opposed the development of Wolf Creek back in the day for a whole bunch of reasons based on the best science we had at the time. I was convinced that coal was a better alternative fuel for the generation of electricity in Kansas. The cost overruns at Wolf Creek were staggering. So we had a vote here in the legislature on the water contract that was necessary to make the construction of Wolf Creek possible. I led the effort along with Fred Weaver and a bunch of other folks from that part of Kansas that were opposed to it.

I remember very well that intense debate about Wolf Creek. I lost that debate here in the Kansas House, but fast forward a few years, when I was in the Congress, I was still dealing with the Wolf Creek problem. In the first ten or fifteen years of Wolf Creek, the cost was off the charts.

JM: The rate disparities cost by the cost overruns.

JS: I was dealing with that later as a member of the Congress.

JM: Not only that, but you carried into Congress with you, you say one of your objections to Wolf Creek were the cost overruns, but when you got to Congress, you were a deficit hawk. That was one of the things that really was important to you all the way through.

Talk to me a little bit about the partisan atmosphere here. With all the people we've interviewed for this series, one of the things we're paying attention to is how that has changed over the years.

JS: Yes.

JM: When you were in the Kansas legislature, when you first got here, you say Democrats were short of 50 votes in the 125-member Chamber, but you suddenly gained seats, and you had the majority in 1976. But based on what you're telling me here, on these major issues of school finance and campaign finance, the parties worked together.

JS: They did, but we also had our sharp differences of opinion. Let me give you a specific example. There was a member of the state legislature, his name was Kenny Winters from Johnson County, the Kansas City area. Kenny was chairman of the Federal and State Affairs Committee that I was a member of. I'm this sort of bomb-throwing young Turk, twenty-four years old. My dad cautioned me. He said, "Always be careful about those people who know the answer before they hear the question." As I look back now in that point of my life, I was probably one of those people my dad was concerned about because I probably thought I knew a lot more than I did.

Kenny Winters was the chairman of the Federal and State Affairs Committee, and we would debate intensely on issues in that committee. Campaign finance reform was in that committee. That was one of them. But Kenny and I, in spite of some of our deep political differences, developed a very close personal friendship to the point where when Linda and I got married in 1974, Kenny found out that I had gotten married, and he invited me to come to Colorado to stay at his place in Grand Lake, Colorado. I've often thought, "Wow, what a generous man he was." He was just a good, decent human being, he and his family, and I just love those folks, and yet we could disagree sharply on an issue and walk away from it and have a beer that evening and move on.

It is that capacity to have your sharp political differences yet maintain a friendship that we have lost, and we have to find that again. You cannot in a democracy solve these complex problems we're dealing with unless you have trust, and you don't ever develop trust between two human beings unless you get to know each other. You have to listen to each other. You have to really listen with the desire to learn, not just for the desire to respond, but the desire to learn from the other person that has a sharply different point of view.

I think we did that back here when I was in the state legislature. I developed some very important personal friendships on the Republican side of the aisle when I was here in the state legislature. One of them was with Senator Ed Reilly from Leavenworth who later married my sister. I'll never forget on our honeymoon, much to my surprise and first I thought it would be to my chagrin, when we arrived out at Grand Lake, Colorado on our honeymoon, I was expecting to see Ken and his wife, Marty Winters, and, lo and behold, Dave Heinemann and Jim Maag were there, my Republican colleagues from the state legislature, but we had a wonderful time.

Those personal friendships that were possible and nourished here in the state legislature, I think made lawmaking at that time much easier. You look back on that time in the seventies. We dealt with incredibly complex tax issues. We reformed the Kansas income tax system over the governor's veto, bipartisan, two-thirds vote in both the House and the Senate.

JM: Over the governor's veto.

JS: Over the governor's veto. Think about that, okay? We started the debate over classification. We had a horrible problem.

JM: The classification of property for tax purposes.

JS: We had a horrible problem in Kansas at that time. We had a provision in our Constitution, requiring that all property would be taxed and assessed uniformly and equally. It wasn't. Our whole property tax system was blatantly in violation of the constitutional requirement of uniformity. So I was pushing and carried on the floor of the Kansas House the first classification amendment that permitted the legislature to respond to a court decision in the event that the courts struck down as invalid our whole tax system and Kansas property tax system. I lost by two votes, and I had those two votes the night before the vote. I lost them over the night.

But the long story short is, had that amendment been passed, the legislature would have had the authority to respond to a court decision, and they would have had the authority to set the different rates for the different classes of property differently. When the final classification amendments passed, unfortunately, it tied the hands of the state legislature.

JM: Yes, several years later.

JS: In ways that I think the legislature deeply regretted.

JM: To this day.

JS: To this day. Anyway, so that and welfare reform. The other thing that we were involved in back at that time was the first really intense debate over the reform of the correctional system.

Don't overlook the importance of that because we were warehousing people, and the whole idea was that we needed to try to develop a community-based corrections system.

JM: Community corrections.

JS: Community corrections. That was a new, novel approach to dealing with incarcerated citizens. I tell you, Dr. Karl Menninger was a national leader in this whole area of prison reform. Dr. Karl Menninger used to regularly come to the state legislature and testify. He wrote these New York Times bestsellers, *The Crime of Punishment*, *Love versus Hate*, and later *Whatever Became of Sin?* He was a brilliant psychiatrist that was called "the Father of Modern American Psychiatry."

JM: Yes, a worldwide reputation.

JS: A worldwide reputation.

JM: He was here as a resource for you all.

JS: He was here as a resource, and he regularly would come down and testify before the state legislature on all these issues.

JM: You say we've lost that collegiality that you thought was so important. You're not here in Topeka very much anymore, but you still pay attention to the political scene in this country, and you pay a lot of attention to what's going on in Kansas, and you say we've lost that to our detriment. What is it that we've lost? Why have we lost it? What happened to our political system?

JS: There are many, many things that are affecting this. I think the intense demand by members of the state legislature and for the United States Congress to raise a lot of money to get elected these days, it just consumes way too much time. That coupled with the force of religion in American politics, in state politics. It's a part of this that we don't talk about very much, but we should. We should have a very open, candid discussion about this because back in the day, if a friend of mine who was on the Republican side had a different view than mine about tax policy or about some issue dealing with crime or education funding, campaign finance reform, I didn't look at them with the attitude that I was morally right, and they were morally wrong. "I'm good; they're bad. They're evil." I didn't have that attitude, and people on the other side of the aisle didn't have that attitude in reverse.

Today, and I think a lot of this is driven by some of these enormously complex social issues and religious issues—abortion—

JM: The culture wars.

JS: Abortion is fundamentally an extremely divisive issue in Kansas and all over the country that has distorted American politics. It started in 1974, right here in Kansas, the Roy/Dole race. That was going on at the time we were in legislature here. That was starting that whole issue, and I think it has had a profound effect on politics. The reason it is, it's a unique issue in that pro-life people believe with their heart and soul that abortion is murder. It is the taking of human life. They believe that. I will tell you that that's not a crazy view. There's solid reasons for them to believe that. Pro-choice people believe with equal intensity that this is a matter that should be resolved and decided by the woman and the woman only. These arguments and these positions have not ever been reconciled. It's a very difficult issue to reconcile, but you have, albeit right now in Kansas, I would say it's Kansas in certain communities, there may be as many as 40 percent of the voters that have nothing further to say to you after they conclude that you're pro-choice or if you're pro-life in some communities. They do that, they take those positions with intense moral conviction. So they look at you if you're on the other side of this issue, and they look at you almost with—

JM: Disdain.

JS: A sense of contempt.

JM: Right.

JS: They look at you as though you are evil, that you're a morally flawed person, and you're sinful, whatever. Why should I engage you in discussing anything if you're such a terrible person? So that moral intensity is something unique maybe to our time that we haven't had since—

JM: Since slavery.

JS: Maybe since slavery.

JM: I'm not the first person to think that those issues are somewhat analogous. I think there's an irony to that, given Kansas's history with slavery and the birth of this state around that issue, and the fact that, you're right, starting in 1974, but then certainly with the protests that occurred in Wichita, then that abortion issue became so divisive in the state and is to this day. I think it really does—the ripple effects of that last.

JS: I would say that the state legislature today is overwhelmingly pro-life in Kansas, as evidenced by recent votes on the Constitutional amendment issue. The people that are strongly pro-life, they have a reasonable position and a position that certainly should be respected. And pro-choice people need to listen carefully to the strongly held views of the pro-life people, and the pro-life people need to listen carefully and with an attitude of learning from the pro-choice people. We need to find some accommodations, and we need to do it in a way that reflects an awareness of the limits of government in this area.

I cite this as a unique issue to our time that started in the 1970s that has been burning in American politics since.

JM: And still smoldering.

JS: It's distorting the American political system in a very significant way.

JM: What we're lacking now, it has essentially—we've lost a certain level of respect towards one another in the political discourse.

JS: Absolutely.

JM: That issue and others, but that issue certainly was a catalyst for that. Back to your days in the state legislature, how many terms did you serve here?

JS: Three terms. I retired at age twenty-eight.

JM: You didn't retire. You moved on, right?

JS: I'll never forget the day. I got a big kick out of it. I called a news conference to announce my retirement from the state legislature.

JM: At age twenty-eight.

JS: I had started a real estate business in Topeka. I made commitments in the business world that I just could not ignore, fulfill being gone three or four months out of the year, and five, if you were in leadership positions. So anyway I decided to go.

JM: You also, when John Carlin was elected governor in 1978, a bit of a surprise, an upset victory over "Bob" Bennet, didn't you serve for time in his Cabinet?

JS: I did. He asked me to be Secretary of Revenue, and I couldn't do it because of my business commitments with Brosius & Slattery Real Estate Company at the time, but I agreed that I would be the acting Secretary through the first time of his governorship. We had a wonderful understanding. I am proud to this day of the people that I helped pick and choose and recruited to staff the Department of Revenue, and John Carlin, we all agreed on these choices very quickly, and we put in place a great team over there that served Governor Carlin.

JM: You eventually gave way to Mike Lennen?

JS: Mike Lennen, I recruited Mike Lennen. He was on the East Coast. I begged him to come back and succeed me in my acting position as Secretary.

JM: He grew up in Coldwater, so he was a Kansas.

JS: Yes. I had lunch with him today.

JM: So you served three terms in the legislature. You left to start a business here in Topeka, and then what? You decided to run for Congress in 1982.

JS: 1982, yes.

JM: Why did you jump back in?

JS: Listen, in 1982, I was furious with what was going on in Washington. We had hyperinflation, and we had interest rates that were 15 percent. That's hard to believe today when the T bill rate today is about 1 percent, a ten-year T bill rate.

JM: And you were really furious because you were a real estate agent.

JS: I was a real estate agent, and the folks in Washington were putting me out of business. That got my attention. Let me tell you, if you have 12, 13, 14, 15 percent long-term interest rates, that will suck the fun out of the real estate business in a hurry when you're trying to sell people homes, especially first-time homebuyers. I was very convinced that huge deficits that we were running and high-interest rates were just enormously destructive, and they were related, and at the time, they were.

That's what really got me going to run for Congress. I was just very troubled by the way we were headed in Washington, and at the time, the ag economy in northeast Kansas was in a shambles. Farmers were going broke all over. They were the first victims of high energy prices and high interest rates because agriculture is a capital-intensive business. You need a lot of money to put crops in the ground.

JM: A low-margin business.

JS: And a low-margin business, and it's an energy-intensive business. In the 1970s and 80's, energy prices had gone through the roof with the Arab oil embargos, and interest rates were off the charts.

JM: Those were the days of tractor caravans to DC, the farmers' protest and so forth. So you went for Congress. At the time, wasn't Jim Jeffries the incumbent?

JS: Yes.

JM: You were preparing to run against him, but he stepped out of the race.

JS: Yes. Jim Jeffries and I were both from Atchison, and I knew his family. I knew Jim. I liked Jim, a good guy. We disagreed on about everything politically, but we could have a wonderful conversation. Again, back to that period of time when you could disagree without being disagreeable, and you could respect each other and learn from each other. Anyway, I considered Jim to be a friend. The long story short is he called me up to tell me he wasn't going to run. It was about ten days before the filing deadline. That's another whole story.

JM: Who did you end up running against though?

JS: Morris Kay.

JM: That's right. I had forgotten that. I think we'd be remiss if we didn't talk a little bit about your Congressional career here. You spent ten years, more than ten years—

JS: Twelve.

JM: Twelve years in Congress, and you were a deficit hawk.

JS: Yes.

JM: That's interesting as a Democrat, that's one of the reasons you ran. You were upset about the deficit.

JS: Yes. I was intensely focused on the budget issues in Washington. This was a wonderful Congressional district. I had thirteen counties in northeast Kansas prior to the '92 election and redistricting when we lost a Congressional seat in Kansas because our population hadn't grown adequately, but an incredible Congressional district. It was anchored by Fort Riley and Fort Leavenworth, east and west. I had the state capitol and all the state government here. We had five Indian nations. I had KU and K State both in the Congressional district, along with fifteen other colleges and universities in the second district. So it was an incredible diverse and intellectually challenging Congressional district to represent. I just loved the district. It was fabulous.

JM: And you did make a name for yourself. I recall, you worked hand in glove some with John McCain on some of these deficit issues, didn't you?

JS: I worked with everybody I could—Senator Dole and Senator Kassebaum, and I later, when I was on the Budget Committee, we all supported freezes on the budget. We tried to find some bipartisan plans that could really address these issues. We had some success, not as much as I was hoping for, but I am proud of the fact that when President Clinton was elected, he came into office with a really strong commitment to deal with this deficit issue, and he did to his credit. In 1993, his first year in office, we passed a very significant deficit reduction plan, which

put in place policies that ultimately brought about the balanced budget and surpluses in the federal budget that were in place when President Clinton left office. The Republican Congress deserves some credit for also working with Clinton on this in the latter part of his term, but long story short, when President Clinton left office, we had surpluses of 250 billion dollars a year, and we were actually talking about paying off the national debt, and what that would mean today, twenty years later, we have 20 trillion dollars in debt. It's a staggering amount of money that we're asking our children and grandchildren to pay that we were unwilling to pay.

JM: When you look back on your Congressional—

JS: “We” meaning my generation.

JM: . . . term, what else stands out to you? I know one of the toughest decisions during those days, too, was the vote on NAFTA. That was a big thing. That came up during your time there. I think some of the initial conflicts in Iraq—

JS: Over those twelve years, we dealt with the farm crisis. I was involved in dealing with the legislation to sort of rewrite the farm bills and try to get some assistance out to help really financially distressed farmers. I was involved with all of these budget issues. The first thing we had to deal with, a major issue that we had to deal with in 1983, after I was elected, was the fact that the Social Security system was bankrupt. We had to address that in early 1983. The first vote I had to cast of any significance, but that was a long time ago. The bottom line is, that legislation that we passed on a bipartisan basis has restored the financial credibility and stability of the Social Security system to the point where we haven't had to address it since.

JM: We're probably due for another look at that.

JS: That legislation was an incredible example of bipartisanship with Senator Dole and Senator Baker in the Senate and Tip O-Neil and Dan Rostenkowski and Jim Wright. It was my freshman class. One of the things that we did as freshmen was demand that if we were going to vote for these changes in Social Security, that members of Congress would for the first time in history have to pay into the Social Security system. That was part of our contribution to it.

The bottom line was, that was a very difficult vote. We ended up having to increase the eligibility age for Social Security from sixty-five to sixty-seven, and we had to reduce some benefits, and we had to raise taxes to make the system financially solvent again. Back in the day, you could do this. Both parties in Washington agreed that in the next election, they would not run ads against people of the other party for their vote on this Social Security measure.

JM: That's another indication though—

JS: It's just amazing. It's unthinkable nowadays, that something like that would happen.

JM: That's what I was going to say. That's another indication. You talked about the bipartisanship and the relationships you built here in the State House in Topeka, but during your time in Congress, at least in the initial years you were there, there was still some of that left in Washington.

JS: There was a lot of it left. President Reagan was the president that signed this legislation dealing with Social Security into law, and I'll never forget that ceremony at the White House, where a lot of Democrats, a lot of Republicans, and President Reagan sitting there signing the legislation.

JM: And Reagan and Tip O-Neil had a famous relationship, a give-and-take relationship, right? They disagreed a lot on policy.

JS: Let me tell you an interesting story about Tip O-Neil and Ronald Reagan. I had the honor of knowing them both and serving with them both. Yes, they would sharply disagree on policy issues and political matters, but they really enjoyed each other's company. They were a couple of Irish men who loved to have a shot of bouJMon or something once in a while I suppose and tell Irish stories to each other. When President Reagan was shot, not very many people know this, but Nancy Reagan would not permit anybody from the Congress to see the president except Tip O-Neil.

Tip O-Neil did not realize how serious President Reagan was, how serious he was injured. He went over to see President Reagan in the hospital, and he was sort of shocked by what he saw, and he knelt down beside his hospital bed and held his hand and prayed with him. Think about that, how far we've come from that kind of a personal relationship to where we are today. That's a powerful image for me about the importance and value of personal relationships that transcend partisan differences, and how important they are to solving the kind of very difficult problems that we're dealing with now and that our children are going to deal with.

JM: I don't mean to jump around too much. Something just occurred to me as I was listening to you here. I do remember back in the day when you were in Congress, and I was working for you. I remember attending a lot of speeches that you gave. There are some stories there, but I do remember, pretty much everywhere we went—

JS: I'm sorry for your having to listen to so many of them.

JM: Your introductory line referred to your initial days here in the State House. You had this opening sequence where you talked about where you were from, the community of Good Intent, and you would move right into, and you got to the State House, and you sat between Justice and Love.

JS: You have a good memory.

JM: Well, I heard it a lot. It was a great little opening sequence.

JS: Here we are sitting on the floor of the Kansas House of Representatives, and I'll never forget my first day here. My seatmates were two members from Wyandotte County, Clarence Love and Norman Justice, great guys. I really loved these guys. But before I even set out in my chair right over here, I'll never forget Clarence Love, who was really a character and a great guy and a good legislator. He represented his constituents well. But here I am, this twenty-four-year-old kid from his perspective, and he at the time was probably in his sixties, and he looked over at me, and he said, "Young man, I just have one piece of advice for you." He said, "If you can't dazzle them with your brilliance, baffle them with your bullshit." That was before I sat down.

JM: He was really imparting a gift to you there at that time.

JS: That's right. Several years later, a guy by the name of Billy Wisdom was elected, and he sat behind me. I used to regale audiences on the stump with the fact that I served in the legislature sitting between Justice and Love and in front of Wisdom.

JM: That's right. It was a good opening sequence. You always hooked the audience that way.

JS: I grew up in Good Intent. I used to kid Bill Clinton that he came from Hope, but I came from Good Intent. Then, in the business world, I formed a partnership with a good by the name of Gary Brosius. So our real estate company was Brosius & Slattery, and we debated whether we were going to use the initials "BS" as our company logo, and we ultimately decided to do that. We literally had real estate signs all over Topeka with our "BS" logo on them. It got us sort of instant name recognition.

JM: It's an attention grabber. What didn't I ask you about, either about your time here in the State House or your time in DC? We could talk for hours about that, but what is it when you look back that you think is important for people to understand about your time here or your time there?

JS: Let me just touch on the Congressional thing for a second, the Congressional service, and that is, one of the things that as I look back I am very grateful for, and that is that I had a wonderful staff. They were servants. They were people who had servants' hearts, and they went to work every day, responding to the people of the Second District of Kansas, trying to help those individual citizens solve their problems.

JM: You had a really good Constituent Service Operation.

JS: The Constituent Service Operation I think was the best that the Second District has ever had. I'm very proud of that. I give Carol McDowell and the staff here that worked in Topeka—

JM: Jackie Bugg, Virginia Mendoza.

JS: Jackie Bugg, Virginia Mendoza, Don Cooper, as I said Carol and John Bottenberg.

JM: Phil Kirk.

JS: Phil Kirk.

JM: Suzanne Klinker.

JS: Absolutely Suzanne, Mary Jane Hamilton.

JM: Mary Jane, yes. She was your senior representative. She drove at Trans Am at age like eighty-two.

JS: It was amazing because we were traveling all over the Second District back in those days. It was [not] uncommon for us to have ten appearances in a weekend. We would go from Atchison to Manhattan to Pittsburg, whatever we needed to do. That dedicated staff really assisted me. To this day, in fact it happened again today in Topeka, people will come up to me, and they will say—I met a woman today from Baileyville, Kansas, and she reminded me of something that I did for her grandparents thirty-five years ago or whenever it was. That is a tribute to this incredibly dedicated staff that I had that helped so much. They went to work every day I believe just focused on serving the people of Kansas.

JM: It occurs to me, as you were going through that story, I know why you made the Freudian slip when you talked about Big Brutus. You called it Big Bertha, but do you know why you did that?

JS: No, but I'm going to learn.

JM: Your briefcase had a name. You had this huge briefcase that was bulging at the seams.

JS: Bertha.

JM: You called it Big Bertha. That's the reason for that Freudian slip.

JS: Oh, my goodness. Thank you. My sister gave me that briefcase.

JM: Lucy.

JS: It was so heavy and very impractical, but I carried it around for emotional reasons.

JM: You wouldn't let staff carry it because you knew there was potential workers comp litigation in that.

JS: Yes.

JM: Well, Jim, it's been a lot of fun to catch up with you. Thanks a lot for taking some time while you were back here in Topeka.

JS: We need to do more of this with the Congressional stuff. I tell you, the work that we did here in the state legislature in the 1970s I think was very significant, everything from highways to welfare reform to school finance reform.

JM: You brought the state—you modernized the state in a way through all those things.

JS: The campaign finance laws that were enacted at that time there were responsive to a terrible situation. I talked about our efforts to decriminalize small amounts of marijuana. I look back on that time, and I realize that on a bipartisan basis, we achieved a lot here in the state of Kansas in the political space. It was all bipartisan. I have some wonderful memories of some of the great, really public servants that I had the honor of serving with here in the state legislature, and I can list a long list of them, but one that I remember was Clyde Hill. He was the Republican chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. He was probably old enough to be my father.

JM: A powerful position.

JS: A very powerful position. One day, I had made some comments on the floor of the House that were probably on the edge. That evening, I was sitting at my desk, and Clyde came over, and he said to me, "Jim, do you have a minute? Can I interrupt you?" I said, "Sure, Mr. Hill." He proceeded then to tell me that whenever I went to the mic, I was commanding the attention of 124 other of my colleagues and the press and staff here and stuff. He said, "When you're at the mic, you have a duty to be accurate in what you're saying and to know what you're talking about. It's a privilege to speak on the floor of the House of Representatives." He said, "I would just really caution you to be careful about what you say and to know what you're talking about."

I have never forgotten that advice. To this day, and I was speaking across town this morning. The advice of Clyde Hill was still echoing with me because in all of my political speeches, I have always tried to be factually accurate. I may have puffed the goods like all salesmen do, but I have never knowingly deceived or lied to my constituents, and I have always felt great pressure to follow the advice of Clyde Hill, and that is, when you're speaking publicly from a position of authority, be cautious and be careful about what you say and to know what you're talking about. You have a duty to do that. I give Clyde Hill a lot of credit for that.

There were some really wonderful Republicans that I served with. I'm sitting here in what used to be Donn Everett's seat here on the floor of the house. He was the Majority Leader from

Manhattan when I was first elected. He was great. He was world class, a brilliant, funny guy. He could always interject a little humor to take the pressure out of the moment, you might say, and Clyde Hill, chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, Wendell Lady, who was just a marvelous man, a great speaker. I really enjoyed my service with Wendell Lady.

On the Democratic side, I had the pleasure of serving with people like John Carlin who later became governor, Mike Hayden, who was a Republican. He was a classmate and later became governor. Pat Hurley, who was one of the most talented legislators and Majority Leaders I had the opportunity to serve with. I could go on and on.

JM: You could go on and on, but I think the lesson you learned from Clyde Hill and those words of wisdom, I think that's a good place, let that sink in a little bit. Let that resonate with people.

JS: One of the things, it's off the subject I suppose, but one of the things that is most troubling to me about President Trump is the fact that he is reckless from the bully pulpit as president of the United States with information. He makes inaccurate statements regularly. In the process, he is devaluing the trust that the American people should have in their president. They may disagree with him, but they need to know that when he is speaking to them, he is telling them the truth, and they need to know that he knows what he is talking about, and he's factually accurate. So, to make a long story short, I wish President Trump would follow the advice of Clyde Hill.

JM: I was going to say we need some more Clyde Hills around. I think that's an entirely appropriate point to make because it is part of our history and it is part of what we're dealing with, and it is part of the evolution of politics that we've all witnessed in our lifetimes, and that you've helped us remember at least a part of here today. So thank you.

JS: This has been fun. I would like to do more of it sometime.

JM: All right. You're on. Thank you.

[End of File]