

Steel Magnolias, a conversation with Representatives Nancy Brown, Ginger Barr, Martha Jenkins and Joan Wagon, October 18, 2019
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Joan Wagon: I thought we had a really good interview, Nancy.

Nancy Brown: Thank you.

JW: And I'm so glad you came over today and brought your friends, Martha [Jenkins] and Ginger [Barr]. This is like what we used to do on the floor of the House.

Ginger Barr: Absolutely

Martha Jenkins: Yes.

JW: So what are your thoughts about what Nancy had to say?

GB: Well, one thing about Nancy, when she talked about Johnson County being the only female and coming—she did not come through the Republican party. I had already served one term when Nancy came in. I did go through the Republican Party, and I did hear some comments about Nancy, nothing in particular, but just to watch her. We end up on the Governmental Organization Committee together. You know, Joan, Martha, Nancy, when new people come in, you get to know them. You want to bring them along. You want them to feel welcome into the Chamber.

I kept my distance from her, okay, because I was told, "Watch her." So she's sitting directly opposite of me in Governmental Organization. She stated that she has opinions and she speaks up. She does. I'm sitting there, and she just takes off, and I go, "I think she thinks like I do. I think she's a pretty sharp individual," and here we are forty years later, thirty years later.

NB: Still friends.

GB: Still deep friends. They used to call us "The Killer Bees." Do you remember this?

JW: No, I don't remember that.

GB: Baker, Barr, and Brown.

JW: I remember Baker, Barr, and Brown right up there in that well, pushing an amendment.

GB: That's right.

JW: I thought, "I love these women, and they're all wrong about annexation."

GB: Joan was on the other side, and we fought like hell.

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MJ: That's hilarious.

GB: And we won. We won.

JW: Yes, you did. You not only won, but it had made it difficult to redevelop cities, but nonetheless—

GB: But it makes you responsible.

JW: That was what I thought was so phenomenal about the climate in the legislature in the eighties and the nineties is that all of us could become good friends.

GB: Absolutely.

JW: That you could start a group like the Steel Magnolias, and we could get things done because it was the right thing to do.

GB: And how the Steel Magnolia name came about—

JW: Tell me about that.

GB: Okay. We were working on the—I'm using old terminology—SRS bill, and Duane Goossen from Goessel, Kansas, who was well respected on both sides of the aisle, he had that budget. He was up here, and he was working the budget. Duane was one of those people that he would work a budget tight, but he was compassionate, and you knew that it would be good.

We had the abortion issue coming, and arguments about abortion, and many of the Republican women legislators felt that if there are children, we take care of them, as well as the Democrats. It was just an issue, and I remember Al Ramirez was in front of me, and you called me, Martha called me.

MJ: On the House floor.

GB: On the House floor, and she said, "Joan just called me. Do you Republican women want to join with the Democrats and bust the budget?" and I went, "Hell, yes."

NB: Then we started calling everybody.

GB: Yes. I don't know who was all on the telephone deal, but anyway, we busted the budget, and Al Ramirez who sat in front of me turned around and said, "Ginger, you're busting the budget." I said, "You're damn right we are." I said, "We're going to take care of all of these kids."

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Then we met over to the side of the Chamber where Elizabeth Baker sat. We all huddled over there.

NB: Drove everybody crazy, all the men crazy.

GB: Yes. We said, "We need a name for ourselves." And I said, "Steel Magnolias." We're all different, but we all come together for the common good." And that's how the Steel Magnolias started.

JW: It's such a wonderful story. You've even got this plaque that you put together.

GB: Do you want me to read—

JW: Yes, what does it say?

GB: Well, from the Steel Magnolias, it struck me as amusing. "Men are supposed to be made of steel or something, but eventually they leave, and then it's left to the women," and that came from the movie [Steel Magnolias]. Then there were editorials from the Wichita Beacon about how "GOP's Female Gang of 11 shows Male Chauvinism Can Be Costly," and then it can. But then we joined ranks with the Republicans and with Duane and passed the budget. We made a statement. And thanks to you, Joan.

JW: Well, I always depended on relationships with people throughout this body to get anything done. I think it works that way. Martha, why did you leave? We loved having you a part of the legislature.

MJ: Thank you so much. I actually truly enjoyed my six years here, and I wouldn't trade—I was sharing this with Nancy Brown as we were driving up to Topeka from Auburn—I wouldn't also trade the six-year period I was here. I could no more serve today or serve under the partisanship that I see at the national level here even locally. The six years in the eighties was perfect for me.

I left because I was defeated. When I ran for office in 1984, I won by a mere 200 votes, and I was elected on the tail end of a ticket where Ronald Reagan and Nancy Kassebaum were at the top. I got swept in with the single large Republican class of freshmen in the history of the state of Kansas. I had filled a seat that was held by the Democrats for thirty years. So I knew my residency here was probably going to be short termed and precarious, but what happened to me in 1990 is what happened to George Bush Sr. in 1992. I had a primary election for the first time. I defeated a man who then ran a write-in campaign in the general election. I don't know if you remember the one-term Democrat by the name of Stevie Stevens out of Tonganoxie.

JW: Oh, my gosh. Who could forget Stevie?

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MJ: She defeated me because I had a three-way general election. My Republican opponent siphoned about 500 votes from me, and so we both lost. She, I think, served only one term, and then the electorate realized, "Oh, we made a mistake."

What I didn't do, and I remember Bruce Mayfield and Jeff Freeman came in when I did, and we were all quite young. I think Bruce was defeated after one term and sought to return to the legislature, and I knew—I appreciated one of your questions about whether or not, if we had continued to serve, whether we would have sought higher office. I actually had in my head that I was going to serve ten years. When I ran, I was twenty-two years old. I was elected a month after I had turned twenty-three. I would have served into my early thirties. I thought that that was a sufficient amount of time to make a difference. You need a little bit of time to get your legs under you. I would have made a difference, and I would have probably moved on to bigger and better things, probably Kansas City, which is what I ended up doing after I left office. But I have no regrets. I loved my years of service.

JW: Martha Jenkins, update us on what you're doing now in your professional life.

MJ: So when I was in the legislature, I was going through law school. It actually took me about four-and-a-half years to graduate. When I tell my employers that, they go, "Why did we hire you? You seem a little slow." Now I'm a full-time lawyer. I work as the general counsel for the Alcohol Beverage Control Board for the District of Columbia. So I was in the private sector. I went to work for Sprint. Then this is my first foray into government. And one of your questions was the bureaucracy. I live in it now; I don't like it. It's been a nice career, however, but I'm ready to return to Kansas.

JW: Well, we're going to see if we can find a place for you.

MJ: I would appreciate that.

JW: Ginger Barr, I remember when I ran in 1982, that was your first time, and I was just taken aback by how fabulous you were as a candidate, and how you worked a room full of people.

NB: She still does!

JW: And have everybody eating out of your hand. I was just in awe of your political skills.

GB: Well, thank you.

JW: So tell us what you're doing now.

GB: What am I doing now? Well, I am semi-retired. I started out in education. I went into the family business and that owned and operated cemeteries and funeral homes. I have a small management company now. One of my passions besides people have been animals. One of the

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things that I've worked on that I'm pleased with was known as the Puppy Mill Bill. Now I worked on other legislation like annexation. We got the highways here in Topeka, the Oakland Expressway, the 470.

JW: I think of you every time I drive across it.

GB: Thank you. But probably that bill and that work, and I had Senator Jeannie Hoferer on the Senate side, and I had the Killer Bees with me. That legislation, that was tough because I knew I was right, and it was good public policy, and it changes. It's changed. It's changed with the administrations. It needs to come back. But what's interesting to me is some of the people that are advocates for that type of legislation will come up to me and say, "Ginger, do you mind if we change it?" Would my feelings be hurt? Well, if you're for public policy, your feelings aren't going to get hurt. I said, "No, we have to do what is good government and good for all." Public policy.

JW: You have nice friends, Nancy.

NB: I have great friends.

JW: Thank you both for bringing Nancy today and for sitting here with us. Do you have any final thoughts you want to add?

NB: No, I'm just grateful and blessed that you conducted the interview so we could reminisce about some good times and good friendships and relationships and be with people that we love and care about. So, no, I'm happy to be here. Thank you.

JW: Many times people ask me, "What is your favorite thing that you did?" It's hard to pick a favorite thing, but serving in the Kansas legislature during the time that we were there was an experience that I'll never forget, and I don't think that you all will either. It's kind of nice to look back and see that there are things that we managed to accomplish.

MJ: Absolutely. We did good things together.

JW: Thank you very much.

JW: So what I'd like for you to do as a closing exercise is to paint a memory of some event or something that we can leave as a lasting impression from this conversation.

GB: Okay. You brought it up. Annexation. It was a tough fight.

JW: Yes, it was.

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GB: It was a very tough fight. I had a very formidable opponent. So people get tired of the issues, and they know what the issues are going to be. So the bill was coming on the floor, and I thought, "I've got to get these people's attention." So I put teabags on all the desks and said, "Taxation without representation." Then I put on an Indian bonnet on the well to get their attention. So it may not have been professional, but I got the job done.

JW: And I can still remember the Indian bonnet. Martha?

MJ: I have so many memories, so many good stories. I'm surprised at that. It's been thirty-five years. I was sharing with Dr. [Annie] Miller [Washburn University] that I'm never very good about journaling or documenting, but the more we sit around and talk about them, then the more the memories are reinforced. You actually brought out more of them when you were conducting your interview. One of the things that I'm most proud of was I was named vice chair of the Judiciary Committee in my third term, and I served under Mike O'Neal, for better or for worse. But I will never forget that he—and he called himself this. He said, "You know, Mar, I'm somewhat of a lightning rod. So it's very difficult for me to carry legislation which is so pro-Republican and anti-Democrat to the House well because I'll just get shot down. So I need you to carry some of the water at the well." I said, "Sure, I'll be happy to do that" although I was terribly nervous.

One of the bills was capping damages in tort actions. John Solbach, the minority member for the committee. You could almost see the smoke coming out of his ears and out of his nose. He came stomping down. It was a partisan vote out of a committee, of course. He comes stomping down to the well. He goes, "Representative Jenkins, do you know why I served in Vietnam?" and I said, "Yes, sir. It was so I could run for the legislature." It tears me up because he looked at me. I could tell from his face that he goes, "She actually kind of gets the bigger picture. She's doing this really bad thing, and she know and appreciates how it all works." He didn't say anything. He just went right back to his seat. I felt so bad that we were pushing that bill that limited damages for people who probably deserve it. I'll never forget the look on his face that registered, "Oh, yeah, you're right."

JW: That may be the only time that John Solbach was speechless.

MJ: I know. When I got back to the desk, everyone was going, "Wow, you quieted him."

JW: Nancy Brown?

NB: I remember two vivid memories, and they're both to do with my side of the aisle, the Republican Party. The first one is to do with when I was a freshman legislator, and—why did I get appointed to the Community Development Block Grant program? I don't remember. Mike Hayden was speaker at the time. He was trying to pass some bill about lakes or something like that, and I was in opposition to the bill. I came down and spoke against the bill at the microphone. I was making some really good points. I was really right. After the bill, I don't

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remember what happened to the bill, he left and came running back to my desk. He put his foot on top of my desk. He's shaking his finger at me, and the whole House is looking. I was this dumb freshman legislator. He said, "You will never, ever go to the microphone and oppose me again publicly like that." And I just looked at him and said, "Isn't that what you're supposed to do?" I was too stupid to know that I just really did a major faux pas.

My last term, I remember, it was on special education, and it was like 2:00 in the morning, 3:00 in the morning, one of those times, where we're really hung up here. I was going down to speak on something. I had my papers in my hand. I had my speech written. As I'm coming down, Rochelle Chronister stopped me. She said, "You will not go to the microphone and speak." I looked at her, and I said, "What?" She grabs my papers out of my hand and puts them in her desk drawer and locks the drawer.

JW: Rochelle did that?

NB: Rochelle did that, and Rochelle is a good friend of mine. I just look at her, and I say, "But I've got the speech memorized." So I went to the microphone and gave the speech. I remember, she was so angry at me. It was one of those things. So I remember my freshman year, and my last year, and I'm still butting heads with everybody, but I was still right.

JW: And on that note, thank you.

GB: Thank you.

MJ: Thank you, Joan.

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