

The Skirts, a conversation with Senators Audrey Langworthy and Sandy Praeger and Joan Wagon on October 18, 2019
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Joan Wagon: I'm Joan Wagon, and I'm in the Senate Chambers with two women with whom I've had the pleasure of serving, Senator Audrey Langworthy, who was one of the pioneers in the Senate, one of the first women to chair a Senate Tax Committee, and Sandy Praeger. We were together in the House, and Sandy has had a thirty-year career in the House, the Senate, and as Insurance Commissioner. So what we're going to talk about right now is just a little bit of kind of the inside scoop on what it was like to serve in the Senate. I think the two of you actually even sat next to one another, right?

Audrey Langworthy and Sandy Praeger: We did.

SP: We had a great time.

AL: For eight years.

SP: It was wonderful.

JW: What was it like in the early eighties? The number of women doubled in the House and Senate, but it was '84, when you came in, that you had three brand new women senators. What was that like, Audrey?

AL: Well, Jan Meyers, and she was the only Republican. There were two Democrat women at the time. So the three of us, Jeanne Hoferer, Alicia Salisbury, and myself were freshmen together. We were all put in the same office of 143 North. We tended to walk to the Senate Chamber at 2:00 together, and we quickly became known as "The Skirts." "The Skirts have arrived."

In my growing up or in teaching or in my volunteer work, I had never felt any discrimination, but it was kind of here because the men—it was a Good Old Boys Club, and we were invading, so to speak. It got easier the next term because it doubled again. I think the max ever were fourteen. I'm not sure in the Senate it has ever been any more than that.

JW: But it was quite a change from the lone one or two women in the Senate that had served. If memory serves, you all were absolutely persistent that they put a bathroom in that you could go to.

AL: That's absolutely right. When we got here, there was a men's bathroom here, but the women had to go outside, walk past all the lobbyists that were sitting out there, and there was a single bathroom over here on the outside. That was one of the best things that could have happened was to get the women's restroom.

JW: So we're all thankful to The Skirts.

The Skirts, a conversation with Senators Audrey Langworthy and Sandy Praeger and Joan Wagnon on October 18, 2019

SP: Yes. [US Senator] Nancy Kassebaum said the same thing about being in the US Senate. Not only did they have to leave the Senate Chambers, they had to go down or up a floor. It was crazy.

JW: But it changed by the time you got here, Sandy.

SP: Yes.

JW: You came to the House in '90, and to the Senate in '93.

SP: Yes. Elected in '92, started serving in '93.

JW: How had the culture began to shift?

SP: I think women, just because of the numbers, had more opportunities to serve in leadership positions. I remember it was sort of a joke that the Health Committee took seniority to get off the Health Committee. So I got to chair the Health Committee my very first year in the Senate. And Audrey was my vice chair which was great. Back then in '93, health and health insurance, those issues weren't big issues, but, boy, they rapidly became very big issues as more people were losing coverage, and getting health care was a bigger deal. It was a nice committee to chair and to work with Audrey closely.

JW: Audrey, you had had a rather traditional life. You'd done a lot of volunteer work. Didn't you teach school a little bit, too?

AL: I did teach school.

JW: So kind of a traditional thing. How did they treat you when you got here? Did they treat you differently?

AL: Well, the Good Old Boys, as I called them, they weren't overly friendly. They were nice enough. I was certainly glad to have the other two Republican women with me. We could commiserate a lot together. It was fortunate we were in the same office complex. After hours, we could vent our feelings.

JW: Support is always helpful.

AL: Support.

JW: Sandy, you had served as mayor of Lawrence and on the City Council. I think you had also been on the City Council, Audrey.

AL: Yes.

JW: So you both had political experience. Were things changing by the time you got here?

SP: Back on the City Commission, the year I was mayor, people would comment on, "Wow, you're a woman mayor of Lawrence." I said, "Yes, but I'm the fourth woman mayor of Lawrence." It was not a big deal. I think things were changing. I think there were more women chairing committees. I served on the Tax Committee with Audrey as the chair. I think it became pretty apparent that we had a lot to offer. I'd also been a schoolteacher. I think schoolteachers have lots of skills in terms of working with people.

JW: They do.

SP: And knowing how to get across your ideas using analogies and whatever. I think that served us well, too.

JW: I'm going to break this now, and we're going to do an interview in-depth with each one of you. You were interviewed back in 1991 or 1992. So there's a lot in there about your background. All this will get posted on Kansas Memory, and somewhere out there, there's a bright-eyed young woman who's thinking about a career in politics, and they'll find inspiration from the two of you. Certainly I did, in working with you. Thank you. This is Joan Wagnon for the Kansas Oral History Project.

[End of File]