

The Ladies Room, a conversation with Senators Lee and Oleen, and Joan Wagnon, October 14, 2019
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Joan Wagnon: Good afternoon, this is Joan Wagnon, and I have two senators with me in the Senate Chambers—Senator Lana Oleen, and you served sixteen years and served part of that time as the majority leader of the Senate and Senator Janis Lee who served twenty-two years and also served part of the time as the assistant minority leader in the Senate.

So we just want to talk a little bit about the culture inside the Senate. 1988 was the election that brought both of you in, and actually eight senators came in then. They even had to build a bathroom because there was no women's bathroom close enough for you to go to. What was that like?

Lana Oleen: Well, the bathroom was complete upon our arrival, and we thanked those who helped to make that happen. I do remember thinking—I had come from a short stint in state government—that this is going to be really a great experience. I feel like I really know my towns, and I'm ready to get to work.

Well, they called a caucus, and I thought that would be everyone, but, no, it was a Republican caucus. When I got there, there were four lady senators, and we happened to all be sitting at the same place, and a comment was made that, "Well, it looks like all of the women are sitting together."

I looked out and couldn't help but say, "It looks like all the men are sitting together." While everyone laughed, it was kind of the start of "This is a team, and we're all going to work together." So it was an interesting way to begin. I knew Janis before we got elected, briefly. We had both worked on work-force issues.

Janis Lee: Yes.

LO: So I was aware that I knew one of the new senators coming forward.

JW: I think that's pretty cool. What kind of stories do you remember about those beginning years?

JL: When I think about women's issues, I think about one day, Senator McClure and I got on the elevator. Senator Gaines was there. He said, as we got on, "Well, how are you girls doing today?" I frankly wasn't bothered by being called a girl. It could have been something worse, but Senator McClure was very upset. She said to him, "I'll have you know, I haven't lived fifty years to be called a girl." Poor Senator Gaines had no idea how to respond to such a comment.

JW: Didn't the culture of the legislature change a lot when you brought so many women in? I mean, eight out of forty is not a huge number, but it had to have made a big difference.

LO: It does, particularly in the Senate. During the course of a day in session, you have a pretty good chance of serving on committees with nearly everyone that's in the Senate. If you have multiple committees, which seems to happen to freshmen—

JL: Yes.

LO: Then you have an interaction. You talk about family. You talk about the constituents from someone else's part. You tend to grow in your knowledge of the entire state, not just your district.

JL: One of the things I remember our first year was Lana and I together brought forward a bill that dealt with auctioneers. I don't remember anything else about it but that. One of the things that was so startling to me was that Lana and I had all of our facts. We were arguing facts, and the male senators that we were arguing against had all of these anecdotes and these stories and no facts with their stories. We actually got our bill passed in the Senate. It wasn't successful, but that was a startling thing to me to see that I thought you always debated with facts. Apparently they didn't.

LO: They just liked to tell good old stories.

JL: Yes.

LO: And they were very interesting stories. It was more of a story time than it was a debate time until the vote. But there had been undertones of killing the bill before discussion, and I do remember that Senator Gaines said, "Oh, okay. Then we'll have the talk." Without he agreeing, I'm not sure it really would have gotten to the floor.

So there was a lot of push and pull and good conversation, but always being open I think was the best policy.

JW: Is there any truth to the rumor that women liked to work together to solve problems, and they tend to get together and work on problems more than just fuss around about it? I mean, women being very deliberate about getting together and getting things done. Is there any truth to that?

JL: Yes, I believe that women were good at trying to find a solution, trying to figure out how to make it work. That may come from the fact that as mothers in families, many times we're the one that sort of makes everything work together.

LO: I think that is a part of it. I also think that women will tend to listen a little longer. Sometimes when you listen a little longer, you learn a little more. I think that dialogue not only helped women but helped the process.

JW: Did you ever feel discriminated against in this process in any way because of your gender?

JL: I did not. I felt that once people got to know who you were, and if you came forward with good information, I did not feel that being a woman was a detriment to being here.

LO: I didn't feel that it was. I felt that I had much to learn when I got here, particularly in representing Fort Riley. I wasn't that familiar with military operations and so on. The reception there was just "She's the senator. Senator Oleen is here." I didn't feel a discrimination. I felt a lack of information until I educated myself on some issues, which I wasn't familiar, but there was not that feeling to me.

JW: That's an interesting comment on both your parts. Since you rose to leadership positions, both of you, it's obvious that this body and its membership respected the work that you did and the thoughtfulness with which you brought. I want to thank you for just a short little conversation right now. Lana, we're going to do your interview [next]. I just interviewed Janis, and we're going to put all these on the State Historical Society's Kansas Memory, so that if people want to know what it was like at the end of the twentieth century to serve in the Kansas Senate, they can check out what you have to say.

LO: Sounds good.

JL: Thank you very much.

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